

三生三世枕上书



枕上书了几段几行
摘下千年前一段月光
等佛铃盛放 将眉眼深藏
再开出回忆里
你知的模样

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Three Lives Three Worlds, the Pillow Book

Original work by Tangqi Gongzi

Upper Volume

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Thanks, and enjoy the read!

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Prologue

Green grass flourished in March, orioles filled the sky in April. Stretching beyond the Eastern Sea was the Ten-mile Peach Orchard in lushly splendid bloom.

The Heaven clan of Jiuchongtian and the nine-tailed foxes of Qingqiu were soon to forge an alliance. Days and days went by in discussion between clan elders. Then, one early day in the year, everything was at last decided upon after two hundred and twenty three years of arduous deliberation.

Just in time for peach blossom season, the carefully chosen date fell in late spring.

The two individuals who were finally getting married after an ill-fated spell spanning for more than two hundred years were no other than Crown Prince Yehua of Jiuchongtian and Queen Bai Qian of the Qingqiu Kingdom.

The world had long been waiting to celebrate this news. Going by old Tianjun's style, the masses predicted for there to be unprecedented extravagance on the couple's happy day. Every façade must be grand, as they couldn't imagine how else Tianjun would be emphasizing his regality.

Nevertheless, when the enormous bridegroom's procession emerged by the Wangsheng lakeside on Mount Yuze to enter Qingqiu, Migu Xianjun who was waiting on the other side of the lake with a towel in hand thought perhaps he had underestimated Tianjun.

The wedding legion wasn't grand; it was *excessively* grand.

Migu Xianjun had always been by Bai Qian's side; in Qingqiu he was honored to some reputation. There was a thing or two he was naturally knowledgeable in by being a long-time local in this kingdom.

As with Heaven's tradition, the bridegroom wasn't to come for his bride himself. It was an elder who always bore this responsibility.

Migu figured Moyuan could be regarded as Yehua's older brother. That being the case, it was perfectly reasonable that he, although being an eminent deity of a large clan, had come with the wedding entourage to receive his brother's bride.

And when an eminent deity embarked on a journey, there must be a highly-ranked but not *too* highly-ranked fairy standing by. It seemed the man who was in charge of mankind's fate, the one who inhaled ink for meals under the South Pole Emperor of Longevity¹, Siming Xingjun, had followed along. This was also considered quite reasonable.

As for the legendary dragon in front of Siming whom you could only catch the tail of all year round, Tianjun's third son Liansong Shenjun, he was the Crown Prince's third uncle. While it would seem he didn't have any business here, one could not fault him for coming along for the festivity.

Migu spent half a day in pondering and had found cause for why these three honorable deities were gracing them with their profound aura.

But the purple-robed, white-haired gentleman by Moyuan's side, the renowned eternal-recluse, he who if not as a last resort wouldn't easily step out of Jiuchongtian, he who only sometimes appeared on a few paintings, he who never cared for the younger generation, why was Donghua Dijun also a part of the wedding entourage?

Migu racked his brain and still couldn't come up with a single explanation.

Standing on the other side of the surging lake, even Migu's good eyesight was blurred.

Row upon row of providential aura and pomp stopped adjacent to the Yueya Bay. The procession didn't seem to want to cross the water immediately and camped lakeside instead. The last group of young fairies orderly filed out and together prepared refreshments for the deities.

¹ 南極長生大帝 South Pole Emperor of Longevity is one of the four Daoist Heavenly Ministers. Also, to say that Siming eats ink for meals just means he writes for a living.

Soft wind gently blew across the blue surface of Lake Wangsheng. After the rain, as if they were seizing late springtime's last breath of life, flower blossoms slowly broke out of light green buds. Although it was a little late, it was hard not to be mesmerized by the scenery.

The Heavenly Realm's Third Prince, the groom's third uncle Lord Liansong, flicked the teacup's lid in boredom. He gazed aimlessly at the tea leaves and started idly chatting with Siming beside him. "Prior to departing I heard Qingqiu originally had two queens. In addition to Bai Qian who is marrying Yehua, there seems to be a younger one?"

However much lower-ranked this fellow Siming was compared to Donghua Dijun, he had the fortune to be as well-known because in all of Heaven there were only two walking encyclopedias, the only difference being Donghua Dijun was a walking Buddhist manual while he was a walking Bagua manual². He knew three generations' worth of every secret one's family could possibly have.

This mobile Bagua manual who tagged along with the ten-mile entourage had been keeping to a serious conduct all morning long. He now finally had the opportunity to open his mouth. Although he was eager, he moderated his expression into a prudent one, placed his hands together politely, and when all etiquettes were exchanged, slowly spoke: "Your Third Highness is correct. There are indeed two queens in Qingqiu, the younger one being the only grandchild of the Bai family. She is said to be a mix breed of a white fox and a scarlet fox. She is the only nine-tailed red fox across the lands; she is known as Her Highness Fengjiu. Heaven has five territories and five kings. The Kingdom of Qingqiu, too, has five regions and five sovereigns. Because Lady Bai Qian would sooner or later marry into the Heaven clan, she had given Qingqiu's sovereignty to Her Highness Fengjiu two hundred years ago. When she assumed the position, Her Young Highness was only 32,000 years old. Still, Bai Zhi Dijun had let

² 八卦 (Bagua) is the eight trigrams, a slang for gossip-mongers.

her carry on Qingqiu's mantle. She is so young yet sits so high. But... there's also something odd about her.”

As a young fairy poured them more tea, he paused and took advantage of the rising smoke. Across the hazy fog, he surreptitiously stole a glance at Donghua Dijun who was sitting with his tea.

Liansong seemed to be titillated with interest. He waved his hand and smiled from the corners of his eyes: “Go on.”

Siming nodded and continued after a moment of thought. “In truth, I have known Her Highness Fengjiu from long ago. At that time she was but 20,000 years old, sticking close to Bai Zhi Dijun's side. Because she is Dijun's only grand-daughter, she is terribly adored, and her temper grew ever lively. She was always present whenever there were tomfooleries going on. Even I was teased by her a couple of times. However...” he briefly paused, “more than two hundred years ago, there was a time when she descended to the mortal realm. When she for some reason returned a few decades later, she suddenly became much more solemn. They said on the day she returned, she was wearing mourning clothes. Now that two hundred years have passed and seeing that she is grown, perhaps due to the fact that she was raised to inherit the throne, Bai Zhi Dijun might be worried that she doesn't have someone to aid her with the kingdom's affairs, and for the past one hundred years has chosen several husband candidates for her. But she...”

“But she what?” asked Liansong.

Siming shook his head; his eyes seemed to inadvertently pass by Donghua Dijun. “Nothing, really. She just insisted she was already married to someone. And although he had passed away, she wouldn't remarry again. I also heard in these past two hundred years there wasn't a day when she would remove the white pin from her hair; there wasn't a moment when she would take off her mourning clothes either.”

Liansong propped his cheek and leaned against the stone bench and said, “Now that you mention it, I'm recalling something from 70 years ago. It

was said Cang'yi Shenjun from Mount Zhi'yue took a bride. Did this have something to do with Qingqiu?"

Siming gave some thought. Before he could answer, Master Moyuan who had been sitting in extended silence spoke first. His voice rang clear and light. "It was just a matter of Bai Zhi wanting to give Fengjiu's hand to Cang..." Siming reminded him, "Cang'yi." Moyuan continued, "Yes, Cang'yi. They tied Fengjiu up and threw her into the palanquin. Fengjiu wouldn't have it, so when night fell, she simply destroyed Mount Zhiyue's palace."

He said 'simply' as if it was made of wind and clouds; it unnerved Siming greatly. He was not familiar with this interval of the story either. If he were to continue, innumerable twists and turns would only start to creep out. "Eh..."

Liansong held up his fan with a smile. He sat up in all seriousness and turned to face Moyuan. "You're right," he said, "I remember hearing from someone that you were the officiator that year. But legends have it Cang'yi Shenjun was truly in love with the same lady who destroyed his palace, the wife whom he never married. After having it rebuilt, he hung Fengjiu's portrait up and longed for her as he looked at it each day."

Moyuan no longer spoke. Siming sighed, "And yet, unrequited love is one thing, unfulfilled desire a quite another. I have also heard Lady Qin of Mount Zhonghu had once noticed High Deity Bai Qian's fourth brother, Bai Zhen. So brazen was she that she had even tried to steal him from High Deity Zheyuan."

The rain-glistened flowers swayed in the wind. The eminent deities sat with propriety as they drank their tea, rested their minds, enjoyed the scenery, and listened to the Bagua encyclopedia's tales. The young fairies who came along didn't know how to contain themselves; all were flushed with the excitement of hearing such secrets. But because they didn't dare act with impropriety, they could only exchange glances. On the Wangsheng shore, endless gleaming eyes mingled in the breeze.

A young fairy considerably handed Siming a cup of tea to clear his throat. Siming Xingjun used the lid to scrape away two pieces of tea specks on the surface. His eyes gazed to a few bends in the distance then passed over to Donghua Dijun. His brow furrowed together in thought.

Liansong turned the tea cup in his palms and laughed, "Siming, what's wrong with your eyes today? Why do they keep glancing to Donghua?"

Two meters away, Donghua Dijun placed his teacup aside and slightly looked up. Embarrassment crept onto Siming's face as he laughed nervously. Boom. A titan wave suddenly burst forth from the nearby water surface.

When the ten-meter-high wave dispersed, sparkling under the morning light by Yue'ya Bay was a beautiful maiden dressed in white.

Her alabaster arms contrasted her jet black hair, on which was a white flower pin. As though her clothes were made of an impervious material, not half a water droplet dripped from her body. Moreover, she stood in the morning wind with a nonchalant air, but her raven hair was wet, and a few strands plastered on her face. She emitted an icy coldness but there was a certain warmth in the corners of her eyes. She smiled an unsmiling smile at Siming Xingjun who had been talking with great fervor only moments ago.

Siming frantically grabbed a teacup, blocking half of his face.

"Your face is too big, the cup won't do. Use this," said Liansong, handing him his fan.

Siming miserably knelt down and stretched his mouth into a painful smile. "I didn't know Your Highness Fengjiu is taking a swim here. It was thoughtless of me just now, please think of our many years of acquaintance and leniently forgive me."

Moyuan looked to Fengjiu. "Why were you hiding under the lake, were you doing something?"

The white-attired Fengjiu stood in a puddle of water and demurely replied, "I was exercising."

"Then why did you come up?" Moyuan smiled. "Are you trying to scare Siming?"

Fengjiu paused, then glanced at Siming who was wretchedly kneeling on the ground and asked, "You have just mentioned something about a Lady Qin on Mount Zhonghu, does she really like my uncle?"

"..."

First Half – The Reborn Bodhi Vines

Chapter 01

There came one day when, standing among blooming flowers which hung over the walls like floating clouds inside the Bodhi-covered Taichen Palace, Donghua thought of the first time he met Fengjiu.

At the time he didn't have any impression of her. Being the deity who stayed secluded in Taichen Palace meant he took little notice of anything beyond the changes of seasons, the rise and fall of the moon and sun, or the fortunes and mishaps of creation.

Tianjun reminded him incessantly about leaving Taichen Palace for Crown Prince Yehua's bridal escort, but he wasn't particularly interested in this matter. For that reason, he didn't very well remember the maiden who came forth on Lake Wangsheng's waves, or her voice that was as clear as spring showers. He also couldn't remember that pretty voice forcing itself into laughter when she turned to ask Siming: "Did that Lady Qin from Mount Zhonghu really like my little uncle?"

Donghua's true first impression of Fengjiu was at Yehua's wedding.

The Crown Prince of Heaven was getting married. Furthermore, he was marrying the High Deity Bai Qian whom everyone respectfully called 'Lady'. It was only natural their wedding would be different from others. Immortals on Heaven were divided into nine ranks. Not counting the Heaven family members, those fortunate enough to be invited included, from the fifth rank up, a mere ten Zhenhuangs, Zhenrens, and about thirty Lingxians³.

³真皇 zhenhuang (true eminence), 真人 zhenren (true men), 靈仙 lingxian (divine immortals)

Ziqing Palace was awash in light. The feast was now at its half-way mark.

The incumbent Tianjun was rather pretentious. Regardless of which party, he always excused himself after three drinks, citing low tolerance as reason; even his own grandson's wedding this time was no exception.

On the other hand, the bridegroom Yehua had always had low tolerance; tonight it was especially low. They had yet to reach the third round when a young attendant had to support him back to Xiwu Palace. Donghua, however, could see that the nearly passed-out Crown Prince still managed to walk with admirable balance.

Soon after these two left Ziqing Palace, several Zhenhuangs also looked for reasons to excuse themselves. The stiff atmosphere in the room instantly relaxed. Donghua Dijun turned the empty wine cup in his hand and also intended to leave so that the nervous youngsters could finally drink.

Placing the cup down and rising from his seat, he saw from the hall's entrance the sudden appearance of a sumo flowerpot. A white-attired maiden could vaguely be seen behind it, her head bowed as she tried to lift her skirt with one hand while she held onto the flowerpot with the other. She unsteadily found her way along the columns in the corner, trying her best to maneuver between the feast tables without bringing attention to herself.

Donghua leaned on his arm, looked for a more comfortable position, and sat back down.

The dancers on stage were coming to an intermission with their performance. The maiden in white continually bumped into one person after another when at last she found an empty seat. She cautiously looked around and quickly crawled out from behind the flowerpot. Taking advantage of the applauding crowd, she casually sat down and joined in with the clapping, at the same time hooking her feet behind the sumo pot to hide it under the table.

She couldn't hide it and again, she kicked.

She still couldn't hide it and yet again, she kicked.

She kicked too hard on the last try and sent the hapless flowerpot flying across the dancers on stage, heading straight for the same Donghua Dijun who hadn't gotten around to leave.

The immortals exclaimed as the flowerpot stopped three inches short from Donghua's forehead.

Propping his cheek on one palm, Donghua reached his other palm out to catch the pot mid-air. He glanced his eyes in the direction of the culprit.

Collectively, everyone's gaze followed in the same direction.

The ruckus-causing culprit froze for a moment before nearly instantaneously turning around to a male immortal in sand-colored clothing standing beside her. She asked in a genuine yet solemn voice: "Migu, why are you such a trouble-maker? How can you kick a pot at someone's head like that?"

When the banquet ended, Donghua's steward told him the girl who was donning the white dress and hairpin was called Fengjiu. She was the very same young queen who inherited Qingqiu's throne.

Crown Prince Yehua's wedding celebration lasted seven days from start to end.

In turn, seven days later was Lord Liansong's Festival of Flowers which only premiered once every jiazi cycle⁴. For this reason, many who ascended Heaven for the wedding conveniently postponed their departure and stayed a while longer.

⁴ 甲子 Jiazi is a 60-year cycle, named after its first year, and is used sometimes to mean a full lifespan.

Previously known for its sacred purity, Jiuchongtian for the time being had few peaceful places left. The Pundarika Pond⁵ on the 13th sky was likely one of the last remaining. Imaginably because this pond sat next to Taichen Palace, Donghua's residence, not very many dared to intrude.

Unfortunately, this group of 'not very many' didn't include High Deity Bai Qian who recently married into the Heaven family.

On warm breezy April 17th, Bai Qian helped her niece Fengjiu arrange two small picnics, precisely by the Pundarika waterfront.

Bai Qian, in her late years, married Yehua at 140,000. She always believed her marriage came at the most opportune of times, and could not help but constantly use it as a standard to measure other people's fortunes. Yet after some consideration, she regretfully found that her niece, Fengjiu, was barely 30,000 years old; still too young to talk of marriage. But since it was Fengjiu's father, her brother Bai Yi, who asked for her help, she couldn't very well refuse.

Lately, it was impossible to find a quiet place on festive Jiuchongtian for an intimate meeting. At the same time, she heard Donghua Dijun perpetually stayed inside Taichen Palace and rarely ever stepped out of his doors. A murder or arson might as well happen on his front lawn and still no one would be there to care about it. Bai Qian contemplated for half a day, and with an assured mind, finally made preparations for a small picnic by the Pundarika Pond next to Taichen Palace.

Two blind dates were accordingly arranged, one after the other.

Unfortunately, everyone's plan went awry today. Donghua Dijun not only left his palace, he left to a very nearby place. Just fifty paces away from the picnic and hidden from view by a draping weeping willow, he leisurely lay close-eyed on a bamboo chair as he fished with a sutra covering his face and his foot resting on a purple bamboo rod.

⁵ 芬陀利 Fentouli: the Chinese pronunciation for 'pundarika' which is white lotus in Sanskrit



Fengjiu had her breakfast, drank some tea, and dilly-dallied before making her way to the 13th celestial sky.

White lotuses floated on the azure water, stretching to the infinite yonder. Resembling pure white clouds, they made for an exquisite embroidered scene.

Awaiting at the table was a fan-waving fairy dressed in blue. When he saw her approach, he closed his fan as his eyes curved into a smile.

Fengjiu wasn't really acquainted with this deity. She only knew that he was a young lord from a certain branch of the Heaven Clan, that he had been cultivating on a certain mountain in the mortal realm, and that he was friendly and polite. His only flaw was his meticulousness. He couldn't stand ill-mannered people nor could he stand unpunctual ones. For this reason, she deliberately came half an hour late.

But now she thought to herself she should've been another half-hour late, as this fastidious fairy had still waited patiently for her.

Being a small meal, they didn't keep to too many formalities between each other. They sat down and started to talk.

Disturbed by their pleasantries, Donghua lifted the book from his face and glanced across the willow shades. Fifty steps away, Fengjiu was slightly tilting her head as she frowningly stared at the fan-shaped lacquered tray.

The arrangement on the serving tray was quite crowded. On it was a wine bottle made of Dongling jade along with several lavish dishes.

Meals on Heaven traditionally came in sets, and each person had his own tray. Although the dishes were the same, wine was prepared according to each person's taste.

The blue-robed deity closed his fan and broached a topic. "What a coincidence, my family has been in charge of the Fairy Clan's rites since ancient times. In a conversation with Lady Bai Qian, she mentioned Your Highness's understanding of etiquette has also reached the..."

The words 'peak of perfection' hadn't rolled off his tongue when he saw that Fengjiu had already finished the trotters with stunning speed. She scraped the leftover sauce with her chopsticks and asked him with a hiccup, "Reached what?"

The corner of her mouth was still smeared with sauce.

The blue-robed deity with excellent understanding of etiquette looked at her in disbelief.

Fengjiu took from her sleeve a small mirror. "Is there something on my face?" she mumbled and raised the mirror to her face. A pause. "Oh, there is."

She emphatically wiped her mouth using her sleeve, smearing the white fabric with a patch of grease.

The blue-robed deity who liked cleanliness turned slightly blue.

Fengjiu examined herself in the mirror again and, as if nothing had happened, shoved it back into her sleeve. The mirror's wooden handle was covered in soiled fingerprints.

The blue-robed deity's face turned from blue to purple.

At this moment, two drops of sauce dripped from her chopsticks onto the marble tabletop.

Fengjiu held the chopsticks in her mouth and used her fingernails to scrape the stain. Unable to get it clean, she proceeded to wipe it with her sleeve; this time it went away.

The silk napkin in the blue-robed fairy's hand suspended in the air.

They looked at each other for half a day's time. The blue-robed deity's face had turned black at this point. He hoarsely said, "Your Highness, please continue your meal. I just remembered I still have something to do, I must excuse myself first. We'll continue our conversation some other day." He left the moment he finished speaking; he walked so fast he might as well have run.

Donghua Dijun removed the sutra from his face. He watched Fengjiu sadly wave goodbye while still holding onto her chopsticks. Her bright eyes shone boundless emotions yet behind them was a secretive smile. With a soft regretful voice she said, "Farewell, don't let me wait too long~~~" until the blue-robed fairy disappeared completely from her sight. That was when she broke out laughing and slowly produced a handkerchief to leisurely wipe her hands and sleeves.

After two hundred years of practice, Fengjiu's ability to scare other people had really reached the level of natural fluidity. The second fairy that came to meet her also came full of confidence but left utterly defeated. Only a mess of dinnerware remained on the table at this point.

In less than an hour, Fengjiu finally felt full after finishing two servings of trotters. She grabbed her teacup and turned to face the Pundarika Pond. She sat there to enjoy the majestic Taichen Palace while waiting for her food to go down.

Donghua caught two small fish. At this time, his 7788-page-long book was also turned to the last page. Looking up, the sunlight was getting fiercer by the minute. He gathered his things and rose to go home, naturally passing the picnic on the other side of the pond.

Fengjiu remained holding her teacup absently like an old granny. When she heard the leisure footsteps coming nearer, she thought it was Migu, he who was even more sluggish than an aging grandpa. She broke from her trance and said, "Why have you come so soon? Did you worry I'd harass them?"

She moved to another chair and mumbled, "Auntie's taste is becoming strange these days. I can't believe she picked out two sickly kids this time. I didn't have the heart to beat them up, so I only pulled a tiny sham to scare them away. But now I'm exhausted." She held onto her teacup for a moment. "Come and sit with me awhile. It's been so long since I last watched the sun rise and set here, I kind of miss the sight."

Donghua stopped at her words, and then unhurriedly sat down behind her. He chose one of the two teapots on the table and poured himself a cup of tea to clear his throat.

Fengjiu momentarily fell into silence. The white lotuses seemed to have sparked something in her mind. She turned the teacup in her palm and dazedly said, "It is said that each of the white lotuses in this Pundarika Pond was created from a person's heart; although we aren't acquainted with many mortals, Migu, tell me... do you think Qingti would also have his own white lotus here?" She paused and continued with skepticism, "If yes, then which one do you think he is?" Then she heaved wearily like a premature granny, "One that's just like him..." Her words came equipped with a sigh as she sipped more tea.

Donghua refilled his teacup without answering. Migu, as he now hazily recalled, might be the immortal who was with Fengjiu that day. It seemed she had mistaken the two of them. As for Qingti, he had never heard of this name.

The tree cast its shadow on the ground. Her voice was vague: "Half a month ago, Su Moye from the West Sea invited my fourth uncle out for a drink. I wheedled my uncle into bringing me along. When we passed by that place in the mortal realm..." she paused for a moment, "it turned out

the state of Jin had fallen seven years after Qingti died.” She hesitated then added, “I knew it wouldn’t last very long.”

She sighed again and turned around to pour herself more tea, her lips continuing to mutter: “I heard Su Moye has just come up with a new tea. What was its name? Ah, Floating Blue Spring. It’s pretty good. Help me weave a bamboo basket. Next time when I go to the West Sea, I’ll...”

As she raised her head, her next words became caught in her throat. A fit of earth-shattering coughs ensued. After she was done coughing, she maintained her posture and continued to pour tea. Half a day passed by yet she couldn't utter another word.

Donghua placed his long slender fingers on the light blue porcelain cup. They glistened in the reflected sunlight on the lid. His indifferent eyes lingered on Fengjiu’s stained sleeves. Then they moved up to her flushed face which was crimson from choking coughs. Her face was almost the same shade as the maple leaves.

As she recovered, a smile gradually displayed on her face. It wasn't natural, but it was still a smile. She said with hollow politeness, “I didn't know you were here, Your Majesty. How careless of me. I'm Fengjiu of Qingqiu, please accept my greetings.”

Donghua listened to her greeting and gazed up to stare at her for a while. He waited for her to finish bowing her head and sat back down before he nonchalantly asked, “Were you that surprised to see me?”

Her every step was perfectly calculated. She seemed genuinely surprised as she moved her lips to offer him her distant polite smile again. “I can hardly believe I would get to see you again. Words can't describe how overjoyed I am. But you are disapproving of me.”

Donghua nodded and thought to himself that her wording was obvious. It was difficult to detect her ‘joy’ within that stiff smile. Donghua lifted his hand and poured her another cup of tea.

The two of them continued to sit there in awkward silence. Soon, Fengjiu finished her drink and reached out for the teapot in what seemed to be an odd pouring position. Donghua glanced up and saw the cup tipping more and more. As the cup became full, the hot tea spilled out and splashed all over her white skirt. That was an impression on par with a fried dumpling.

Donghua rested his hands on the stone table, watching her intently.

At first, he had only been curious when he saw her watch the sunset with such absorption. He had thought perhaps the scenery was different viewed from this spot. And since she asked him to sit down, he did. Now he suddenly felt amused when he realized she might still be putting on an act. She probably thought he was also one of her blind dates, but since she minded his background, she couldn't just shoo him away like she did the other two. That was why she cleverly resorted to this desperate measure, not hesitating to drench her own clothes so she could excuse herself. The spilled tea was still emitting steam on her skirt, showing that it was truly hot and she had put herself up to a tiring task.

He leaned his cheek on his palm and wondered whether she'd try to flee. Sure enough, she offered him her trademark expression which was a mix of regret, respect, and politeness, while masking her joy in saying goodbye. "How careless of me to have spilled the tea. What a mess I am right now. I hope you'll excuse me first. I'll come and discuss religions with you on another day."

The wind brought with it the perfume of white lotuses. Donghua raised his eyes and gave her the larger teapot as he casually said, "One teacup was nothing; you might as well use this. The tea has cooled when I last held it. Spill all of this on yourself again, that's what would be called a true mess."

"..."

Donghua Dijun had long retired to the privacy of Taichen Palace. The younger fairies didn't get to experience his venomous tongue, but the older

generation could never forget it. The King wasn't much of a talker. But when he did talk, his words pierced sharp like the blade in his hand.

According to legend, there once was a young ignorant lord from the Demon Clan who heard of Donghua Dijun's fame. He valiantly trespassed into Jiuchongtian one year, wanting to duel with Donghua. But no sooner had he arrived at Taichen Palace's doors was he stopped by the guards.

Donghua was playing chess on his own by the lotus pond at the time.

The brash young lad screamed up a storm despite being pinned down in an effort to lure Donghua out. When Donghua called his guards back, he yelled even louder, saying things such as Heaven was known for their honorable ways, if Donghua still had any honor left, he'd come out to duel with him one on one instead of ganging up on a loner.

As Donghua passed by with the chess box in his hand, he backed up two steps and asked the young man on the ground, "What... was it that you said?"

The young man gritted his teeth. "Honor! I said honor!"

Donghua picked up his heels and continued to walk on. "What's that? Never heard of it."

The young lad had trouble exhaling; he fainted unconscious on the spot.

Fengjiu could only remember this anecdote three days later, when she was at Qing'yun Palace watching her aunt discipline her son.

Qing'yun Palace was where Bai Qian and Yehua's beloved son resided. He was also known as the little dough, His Young Highness Prince Ah Li.

In a bright yellow outfit, the young prince sat facing his mother. He sat on an adult chair, his feet dangling off the ground. He tried his best to reach his feet down but the chair was too high while he was too short. He tried for half a day and still couldn't manage to touch his toes to the ground. He

bitterly gave up and dropped his small head to listen to his mother's lecturing.

Bai Qian sternly chided her son: "I heard your dad as a young boy was able to recite the *Great Sattva Scripture*, the *Victorious King of Heaven Doctrines*, and the *Aryacalanatha Envoy Sutra*. But we must've spoiled you. You're now 500 years old, yet you can't even recite the *Huelin Ideophone Text*. Alright, so it's not the end of the world, but can't you leave your parents some face?"

The little dough grumbled and logically countered, "I didn't want it to be this way either. But my excellent brains were inherited from you, not from dad!"

Fengjiu spat tea from her mouth. Bai Qian glared at her with squinted eyes. She stifled her laugh and waved her hands in explanation. "No, it's just that my stomach has been acting up lately. You guys go on, go on~~"

After Bai Qian's eyes returned to the little dough, for some reason, Fengjiu suddenly remembered the story which involved Donghua Dijun driving the young lord of the Demon Clan mad. She took another sip of tea and unconsciously smiled to herself. But when she gazed down at her mourning clothes, her smile evaporated away. She raised her hand to brush off a loose strand of hair.

The troubles in life were as countless as the hair on her head. She got lost in recalling these past twenty-seven hundred years. So many things had happened. There were things she could remember, and there were things she pretended to forget. And as she pretended, some really seemed to have disappeared from her memory over time. Qingqiu wasn't exactly peaceful these past two hundred years, thus there weren't many occasions when she thought of Donghua. But she was now bumping into him quite frequently on this trip to Jiuchongtian. He didn't seem to recognize her, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing in her eyes.

She and Donghua, as the Buddhists put it, were an impossibility. But perhaps 'impossibility' was an inaccurate term. Theirs was more of a cursed fate.

The last day of Liansong's Flower Festival had finally arrived. As always, it was on this day when every species of flowers simultaneously bloomed in glorious colors. Even the ancient Buddhas had come to attend from the Western Heavens, bringing with them rare species from Lingshan. Jiuchongtian was taken over with festivity. From top to bottom, everyone joined in the celebration.

Fengjiu had never been much interested in these flower and grass business. It just so happened a fairy from the mortal realm had especially presented an opera troupe for the Crown Prince's wedding a few days ago. At this time on the 7th level of Heaven at Chengtian Terrace, Migu was preparing for an excerpt about a general and his beauty.

Fengjiu brought with her a pouch of melon seeds and took the little dough through Heaven's 7th gate to watch the play.

This soft milky stepchild⁶ was her only cousin, the little dough A Li.

Beyond the tall gate of the 7th sky, under the sparkling light which filtered through dense shades, the withdrawing figure of Donghua Dijun was stealing away from the Flower Festival's grand ceremony. In his own company, he retreated to his books and tea by the Miaohua Mirror.

Miaohua Mirror was one of the sacred places on the 7th celestial heaven. It was called a mirror but it was actually a waterfall in reality. There are billions of worlds in the great trichiliocosm⁷. With the right ability, one could gaze into the glass to watch the rise and fall of these worlds.

⁶ 拖油瓶 tuoyouping – stepchildren on the wife's side who come to live with the new husband. FJ is joking that the dough is extra baggage like stepchildren.

⁷ 三千大千世界 Thrisahasra Mahasahasra Lokadhatu – Trichiliocosm, a Buddhist cosmology concept in which 1000 worlds make a chiliocosm, 1000 chiliocosms make a dichiliocosm, and 1000 dichiliocosms make a trichiliocosm. $1000^3 = 1$ billion worlds.

As such, the waterfall's mystical energy was overwhelming. There were few fairies who could withstand it. Even the ancient Zhenhuangs suffered from headaches whenever they came here. This was why for the longest time, Donghua was the only one who used this place as a resting spot.

Fengjiu led the little dough through the gate and reminded him, "Stay on this side and don't get too close to the Miaohua Mirror. Be careful not to get hurt from its energy."

The little dough obediently listened and stayed away. He kicked on the small gravels as he grumbled, "Dad's a meanie. I clearly remember last night sleeping in mom's Changsheng Palace. But this morning, I woke up in Qing'yun Palace. Dad lied to me and said I sleepwalked home." He then shrugged a helpless shrug and said, "It was obvious he had carried me back after I fell asleep so he could keep mom to himself. So unscrupulous of him to lie to his own son."

Fengjiu tossed some melon seeds in the air and said, "Then why didn't you run back to Changsheng Palace and cry up a scene? That was your own mistake."

The little dough jerked in surprise. "I heard only girls can cry, cause a ruckus, and hang themselves." Stuttering, he asked, "A boy can do the same?"

Fengjiu caught the falling seeds and gave a deadpan reply: "Yes, dear boy. Our forefathers included equality in Heaven's codes of law."

With his cheek propped, Donghua gazed after the disappearing silhouettes of the cousins. In his hand was a book. Within the Miaohua Mirror was the drastic changes of kingdoms' affairs told through battles and wars. When it completed its recount of an epoch's rise and fall, the tea on the stone table was also coming to a boil.

There was still a long way to go from the entrance gate to Chengtian Terrace.

When they reached a rockery, the dough complained fussily and stopped to rest. As they sat down, a blinding silver light appeared from the sky. At the center of this light was a galloping horse-drawn chaise. Its wheels ran across puffs of cloud, leaving behind residual cloud masses. When the cotton-like clouds drifted away, in the air was a lingering scent of wild flowers.

Such a grand display. This horse carriage must have belonged to a fairy who ascended Heaven from the lower realm for the Flower Festival.

In a flash, the carriage had disappeared. It seemed it was heading for the 8th level of Heaven. Behind the rockery rang the sounds of two maidservants in gossip.

"Wasn't that Princess Zhi'he on the chaise, Donghua Dijun's foster sister?" said one.

"What a show-off," the other unhurriedly replied. "But how fast time flies by. She's been punished to the mortal realm for three hundred years now."

"Why was Princess Zhi'he exiled? You worked on the 13th sky that year, can you tell me?"

She pondered a long while and at last lowered her voice to reply. "I'm not sure myself, but that year was indeed a troubling time. They say the eldest princess of the Demon Clan was to be married into Taichen Palace. But because Princess Zhi'he was in love with Donghua Dijun, she caused the wedding to fall through. Tianjun was furious at this news and thus relegated her to the lower realm."

The first one was stunned. "What did you say? Married into Taichen Palace? To His Majesty? Why have I never heard of this rumor before? I thought the King has never bothered himself with these worldly matters?"

After some unhurried moments, the other replied, "This union between the Demon Clan and the Fairy Clan... that year only Lord Liansong and His Majesty were still single. These aren't our business to begin with. Moreover, Dijun hadn't ever paid much attention to anything outside of the

heavenly laws. He probably didn't even know what taking a Queen meant."

The first one sighed, and then still not wanting to stop, led right into another topic: "Oh, I remember I once had the honor of meeting Dijun three hundred years ago. He had a fiery red fox by his side. The elders from Taichen Palace said Dijun especially loved that little fox. He took it with him everywhere he went. But why did I not see a red fox at the Crown Prince's wedding a few days ago?"

After a long pause, the other sighed, "That fairy fox was indeed Dijun's favorite. But shortly after the news of Dijun's impending wedding was announced from Taichen Palace, the fox had disappeared without a trace. Dijun sent people to look for it all over the thirty six levels of Heaven, but in the end, it couldn't be found."

Fengjiu leaned against the boulder and tossed her pouch of melon seeds up and down. On her last toss, she used a bit too much strength and threw the pouch at the rockery next to the small lotus pond. The startled maids frantically rushed away. Their footsteps gradually receded, guaranteeing their distant departure.

The little dough refrained himself until his face turned red. Staring at the rippling surface of the lotus pond, he wailed, "And what are we gonna eat now when we go see the play?"

Fengjiu fixed her clothes and stood up to leave. The little dough dropped his head and sulked. "How come there was a fairy fox here but I didn't know about it?" Then he mumbled dubiously, "But where did that fox go?"

Fengjiu stopped walking and waited for him.

The first rays of the morning sun shone down on the 7th sky, spreading a golden light which gave the landscape a painted effect.

Fengjiu covered her face from the golden sunlight and said, "Perhaps it has gone home." Then she turned and glared at the little dough. "Hey shorty, can you hurry it up?"

The little dough determinedly shook his head and replied, "No, I can't!"

Only until Chengtian Terrace came into their sight did Fengjiu finally realize the aurora from the sky just now wasn't early rays beaming from the Morning God's rosy clouds of dawn.

She stood 100 meters away from Chengtian Terrace, stunned frozen on her feet.

Very close within reach, the 100-meter tall Chengtian Terrace made from icy marble for some reason was surrounded in a sea of fire. If Migu hadn't quickly created a force field, the fire would have consumed the singers and dancers by now. The horse chaise belonging to the fleeting glimpse of a beauty earlier was also stopped in front of the fire.

Behind the raging flames suddenly reverberated a loud screeching roar.

Fengjiu narrowed her eyes and finally saw the cause of the fire. A Chiyan (Red Flame) Beast⁸ was flapping its wings out of the fire sea. From its bloodthirsty mouth came shooting flames. It circled the brass bell and flew back into the sea of fire once more, aggressively attacking Migu's force field. The clear force field started to crack, giving way to the fire. The color of fear surfaced on the dancers' faces. They were likely wailing in horror, but because of the force field, no sound could be heard. Like a frozen painting, it gave birth to an eerie atmosphere.

⁸ 赤焰獸 Chiyan Beast – After losing to Fire God Zhurong, Water God Gonggong Ben's wrath triggered the Heavenly River to flood the world, so to balance the fire & water forces, Zhurong sent a fire dragon down to Earth. The Chiyan Beast is said to be this dragon's descendant.

Princess Zhihe's reason for returning to Heaven was plainly obvious. On one hand, she would be attending Lord Liansong's Flower Festival. On the other hand, she could use this chance to meet up with her heart's desire, her foster brother Donghua Dijun. She must owe this opportunity of returning to Jiuchongtian to High Deity Bai Qian's opera-watching pastime. Knowing Bai Qian liked plays, Zhi'he had handpicked and presented to Bai Qian a few of her singers and dancers. Because of this layered reason, she was able to appear as though she was here to oversee her entertainer troupe.

Yet she somehow found herself in this unfortunate disaster. Someone had released the Chiyan Beast's seal and caused the fire the moment her chariot got here.

Zhi'he was, in fact, a water deity. When she was still residing at Taichen Palace, she was the subordinate of the Four Seas' Water God, Liansong Shenjun, in charge of calling rain for the western lands. It was quite rare to come across a useful female fairy on Heaven. For that reason, when she was relegated to the lower realm, she still retained her water god post.

But she knew at this moment her ability to call rain was of little use. She wasn't an opponent to the beast standing before her eyes. As she thought of looking for help, the male fairy in the other force field was yelling something at her. He seemed to have a solution, and he kept yelling, but she couldn't hear a word.

She was still dithering when a blur of white flashed before her eyes. In the air, a pair of white brocade slippers glided forth and billowing sleeves flapped like blooming lotus petals in the hot airstream.

Zhi'he fluttered her eyes from the slippers upward past the gossamer skirt. A startled gasp escaped her. She had seen this face somewhere before in her memory: a pair of thin cold lips, a straight tall nose, a pair of apricot-like eyes, and elegant eyebrows. In the middle of her icy pretty forehead was a phoenix flower mark.

But the girl in her memory had only been a lowly maid at Taichen Palace. In those juvenile days she couldn't stop herself from being jealous of such a stunning servant. Fearing even Donghua would be bewitched if he saw her beauty, she did everything she could to prevent them from meeting one another. Secretly, she had given the maid many a hard time; sometimes she had been downright cruel.

"You're..." she uttered dubiously.

But the one standing before her spoke first. Icily, she said, "As a water deity, why aren't you making rain when there's a fire? What did they make you a water deity for?"

Not waiting for Zhi'he to counter, she took out the flute from her waist and turned straight into the flames.

Over the years, Fengjiu was an expert at precisely two things. One was cooking, the other was fighting. She had lived as a recluse in Qingqiu for the past 200 years without engaging in a single brawl. It was quite a boring life. Now suddenly the Chiyan Beast was causing trouble. It'd be a lie to say she wasn't itching for a little exercise.

The white silk danced into the vast fire. The sound of her flute circled the air, calling rain to come.

Her whirling lone flute tune wound around the fire straight to the sky, waking up the Silver River. From the 36th level of Heaven, the Silver River's water flooded down. In a flash, it was pouring. Although the rain was now tempering the fire, it triggered a new furor in the Chiyan Beast. It left its previous target, Migu's force field, and blew fire straight at Fengjiu.

That was Fengjiu's 'lure the tiger away from its cave' tactic. If not for saving Migu and the entertainers, with her personality, she'd already kill the animal with her Taozhu sword. Of course her opponent was actually a strong beast, and to kill it would be a long process. But at least she wouldn't be in a stalemate like this.

Fengjiu now felt bleak. She couldn't handle both tasks on her own. Her flute continued to summon the rain while she adroitly attacked the demon. Zhi'he was pretty much useless. Fengjiu could only hope the short-legged dough could run home fast enough to find backup.

As she pondered, she remained able to lucidly dodge the Chiyan Beast's fireballs. But because she was using the bamboo flute to call rain, she couldn't cast a protective barrier around herself. From head to toe she became soaking wet. The rain continued to pour, causing the flames surrounding Chengtian Terrace to finally subside. The Chiyan Beast single-mindedly aimed at Fengjiu's body, not noticing that the territory behind him was now undefended. One by one, everyone escaped.

Confronting this way for half a day, Fengjiu was starting to feel tired. She hadn't fought in so long... to lose the battle after only one move? She couldn't allow that to happen. How would she show her face in Qingqiu again? She thought it was time to put away the flute and use the Taozhu sword. However, if she were to attack from the front, it'd most likely be able to escape. Yet if she were to attack from behind, in case it fled away, she herself wouldn't be able to dodge. What could she do now?

She considered these scenarios but before she could come up with an answer, a cold blade from behind had suddenly pierced straight ahead.

The Chiyan Beast breathed raging flames at her. She couldn't care about anything else at this point. As she was trying to escape, an unknown hand brought her away.

The wind force from the moving blade gushed at her sleeves; it was so strong it seemed to have formed an invisible wall suppressing the colossal licking flames. Behind a blast of silver light, the blazing fire ball was hurled back in the direction of the Chiyan Beast.

In her bewilderment, a purple robe fell over her. She struggled to crawl out from under the robe and took a look at the sword-wielding man's back. His body was draped in royal purple, his hair as white as the snow in Qingqiu.

In Taichen Palace, these slender hands had held Buddhist sutras. Outside of Taichen Palace, they now held the Cang'he sword. He looked splendid no matter what he held.

Chengtian Terrace was drowned in blood. It wasn't clear what Donghua did, but behind the silver light, the Chiyan Beast gave out a miserable cry and fled toward the skyline. After two strokes, he heavily fell from the air, causing Chengtian Terrace to shake in tremors.

Donghua sheathed his blade back into its scabbard. Not a bead of blood had touched his body.

Princess Zhi'he remained leaning against the chariot, her face blanched white. She wanted to come closer but ended up retreating from fear.

Although they had escaped, the entertainers couldn't help but remain in shock after such a tremendous scare. Some even began to sob.

Migu helped Fengjiu sit down on a stone seat at the foot of Chengtian Tai. He was comforting her, but he couldn't help himself from lecturing her at the same time. "How reckless of you. If His Majesty hadn't come to your rescue in time what would've been the consequences? It doesn't matter if I died but what would I tell your aunt if something had happened to you?"

Fengjiu muttered, "Didn't everything turn out alright?"

Although she was very grateful toward Donghua, she felt that without him, her aunt and uncle would have eventually come. It wasn't that big of a deal; her life hadn't really been in danger. As she saw Donghua approach with his sword, she thought he was going to Princess Zhi'he, so she got up and moved to the side of the table to let him by. Noticing that his robe was still on her body, Fengjiu lowered her voice and whispered to Migu, "Take off your coat and let me borrow it."

Migu sneezed. Glancing at the purple robe draped over her body, he asked, "Don't you already have dry clothes?" Then after searching for words, he added, "It's all in the past, isn't it? You haven't thought about it anymore for the past 200 years, why are you paying attention to trivial

details today?" He then held tightly onto his own clothes, determined not to lend her any.

Fengjiu removed the dry robe and folded it to return to its owner.

But just as she raised her head, she stepped back in alarm.

Donghua had already come before her with the Cang'he sword in his hand. He looked at her with cold calm eyes.

Her body was soaked through. Large drops of water continuously fell down, and before long a small puddle had formed around her feet. She was extremely embarrassed. While the dripping continued, she glanced back at him and the atmosphere became rather awkward. In her heart, mixed flavors surfaced. She thought of their last encounter and became afraid. She wasn't used to this yet. She still didn't know how to treat this person. To prevent careless mistakes from happening, it was best to avoid him. Recently she even went as far as hiding from him. But she didn't understand why the more she avoided him, the more they kept seeing each other.

Donghua gazed at her from head to toe, his eyes falling on the neatly folded purple robe in her hands. He raised his indifferent voice and asked her, "Are you not happy with my robe?"

Fengjiu thought they were standing too close; the faint scent of white sandalwood was giving her a slight headache. She stepped back and put some distance in between them. When she was at an appropriate distance, with a stiff smile, she replied, "I wouldn't dare. But if I were to borrow Your Majesty's outer robe now, I'd have to wash it and return it to you later... that means we'll have to see each other again, erm I mean, I'll have to disturb you again." Seeing a hard line set on his face, she paused and added, "I'm afraid to disturb your peace."

Donghua placed the Cang'he sword on the stone table, producing a clink.

Migu coughed loudly and said, "Dijun, don't misunderstand. Her Highness didn't mean she doesn't want to see you. You are so magnificent;

she's disappointed she doesn't get to see you every day..." Fengjiu swiftly stepped on his foot and he had no choice but to swallow back the rest of his words in pain.

Donghua glanced at Fengjiu and appeared to have understood. "If that's the case, I'll give it to you as a souvenir. You don't have to give it back."

Fengjiu's inherent stiff smile completely froze on her face. "That... wasn't what I meant."

Donghua slowly sat down. "Then wash it and give it back to me."

Fengjiu smiled, even if her smile was as rigid as an ice block. But this ice block was starting to lose her temper. She dragged her lips to reply: "The weather is warm today; I don't really feel that cold." She then wanted to add bluntly: "I just don't want to borrow the dang robe, alright?" But after weighing it in her mind, she decided it would sound too ill-mannered. She pondered on another way to put it and at last, sweetly said, "Can I not borrow this robe?" She had only spoken when a gust of wind swept over the air making her shiver in chills.

Donghua received the tea which appeared out of nowhere from Migu and took a sip. "No."

Fengjiu had been reining in her temper like a block of ice, but her smile finally dropped from her face. She didn't know what else to say, and numbly asked, "Why not?"

Donghua placed his teacup down and slightly lifted his eyes. "I saved you. Normally others would use their lives to repay such favors. How hard is it to wash one shirt?"

Fengjiu thought back to the past and recalled he wasn't at all the bullying kind. But then she thought perhaps there were times when he was this way, too; he just hadn't let her see it. She gathered her thoughts and put on a stiff smile. "Your Majesty, why are you making it difficult for me?"

Donghua tapped lightly on the teacup and slowly looked back at her. "It's the only hobby I have."

Fengjiu didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Your Majesty, you really..."

Donghua placed the teacup down again. Propping his chin on his hand, he nonchalantly looked at her. "What about me?" Seeing Fengjiu rendered speechless, his normally indifferent eyes revealed a faintest smile. "Say, why did you want to save them?" he asked.

In truth, she wasn't rendered speechless. It just so happened his countenance at this time was so very familiar. It was this same face which had left her a deep impression from long ago. That was why she had stood there in a daze and before she could react, he had changed the topic. But she had heard his question clearly... why did she want to save them? She wasn't sure at first herself. It wasn't because she had cared for other people's lives, but rather because someone had told her something once. At length, she softly replied, "My late husband once told me the strong exist to protect the weak. If I do not save them, I'd be a weakling myself, then what rights would I have to protect my subjects?"

Many years later, Donghua had not been able to forget Fengjiu's words. He wasn't sure what her words had meant. He only knew this child had always made him feel dear although he didn't recognize who she was. In his memory, the first time he ever saw her was by the Wangsheng shore near Qingqiu. With wet hair as dark as sea kelps, she rode the waves and came ashore. But he hadn't remembered her appearance then, in the same way he hadn't remembered how the sunflowers had looked that day.

Today's incident made its way around every corner of Jiuchongtian. On top of that, there were several versions in circulation. In mere seconds, Donghua was thrown all the way from the divine Daoist Trinity⁹ down to one hundred meters of the vulgar world.

It was said at the time the Chiyan Beast was wreaking havoc at Chengtian Terrace, Donghua was adding commentaries in his Buddhist scriptures.

⁹ 三清 Sanqing – known as the Three Heavens of Purity i.e. the three highest manifestations of Dao

When he heard his foster sister Princess Zhi'he was trapped in the fire, he at once rushed to her rescue and subdued the beast. It thus could be seen that Donghua treated his foster sister differently from the rest. However, another said during the Chengtian Terrace fire, Donghua happened to walk by and saw a heavenly maiden fighting to the death with the Chiyan Beast. She was losing and he could no longer bear to watch so he drew his sword to lend her a hand. Tianjun had always deemed Dijun to be a deity with neither desire nor want. It turned out there were also times when Tianjun was wrong. These stories went on and on.

After Liansong caught news of this story, he came to Taichen Palace to look for Donghua for a round of chess and wine. At the same time, he prodded Donghua for confirmation. "That rumor from Chengtian Terrace about a beauty fighting the beast, and you who couldn't stop yourself from helping her, I didn't really believe it..." He placed a white stone down and continued: "But you know, if you've finally decided that someday you'll marry a queen to do pair spiritual study¹⁰ with, Zhi'he isn't a bad choice. Shall I help you put in a good word with my father and bring Zhi'he back to Heaven?"

Donghua turned his wine cup. He looked at the chessboard in contemplation and replied, "A beauty? They think she's pretty?"

"Pardon?"

Donghua leisurely placed a black stone down, blocking the formation of the white pieces. "They've got some good eyesight."

Liansong halted. When he recovered, he closed his fan and asked in surprise, "You really saw a beauty at Chengtian Terrace?"

Donghua kept his eyes on the chessboard. "Are you sure you came to play chess?"

Liansong laughed heartily.

¹⁰ 雙修 shuangxiu – spiritual study done in pairs, i.e. xianxia euphemism for sex

Even Donghua's best friend, Lord Liansong, didn't believe these rumors. Of course everyone else on the 7th level of Heaven likewise took it as a joke. They made a few guesses on Princess Zhihe's favorable future, predicting that her miserable days were finally coming to an end, and that she might soon return to Heaven and perhaps even start something wonderful together with Dijun.

It was said that Jiuchongtian had a rule where immortals had to rid of their seven emotions and six desires¹¹. However, this rule only applied to those not born from fairy births. Ascension to divinity was already anomalous. There was naturally a price to pay for immortality. Donghua, however, had existed since the time Yin and Yang separated at the Blue Sea, a true spirit born out of Heaven and Earth. He wasn't bound to such a rule. For him, taking a queen was a perfectly reasonable matter.

¹¹ seven emotions – joy, anger, sorrow, worry, fear, grief, and fright. Six desires – desires which originate from the six roots: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

Chapter 02

When Fengjiu was little, her parents had wanted to build a love nest for just themselves, so for a long stretch of time she was tossed over into the care of her aunt Bai Qian. Growing up with this aunt, she did everything from snaring birds in the sky to catching fish in the stream. Once, she even plucked all the feathers clean from her fourth uncle's Jingwei bird¹² while he was taking a nap.

Taking into account her even wilder childhood days, Bai Qian turned a blind eye to Fengjiu's mischiefs.

However, her aunt Bai Qian did raise her with an understanding of the greater good. For example, Bai Qian once told Fengjiu that the most important thing in being a deity was to not be afraid of losing face, because being shameless was also a sort of courage as it allowed one to bravely take that first step. No matter what, as long as she wasn't afraid of embarrassment and kept hanging on, she would succeed in the long run.

Years later, Fengjiu used this same logic to pass onto the little dough when she encouraged him to fight for the rights to his mother's bedchamber against his father. "The most important thing in being an immortal is shamelessness. As long as you're shameless... anything can be done."

At night, the little dough repeated these remarks word for word to Bai Qian, asking his mother what it meant exactly to be shameless as well as how to be thick-faced like his father. Bai Qian placed down the bowl of lotus soup she was going to bring to Yehua as a late night snack, then went to the study within Zhangsheng Palace and picked out a few bundles of thick Buddhist sutras. She packed them to the rim in a wooden cart, and taking advantage of the late hours, sent them over to Fengjiu's place. She idly added an instruction to her dear niece that if she didn't finish copying

¹² 精衛鳥 – Jingwei as recorded in 山海經 *Classic of Mountains and Seas* was originally Emperor Yan Di's young daughter who drowned in the East Sea and reincarnated as a white-beaked bird to drop twigs and stones into the sea in order to fill it up.

everything by the next sundown, a series of blind dates would be waiting for her from sunrise to sunset.

Fengjiu was already drifting to dreamland when she was woken up by Bai Qian's maid, Nainai. As her eyes fluttered open, she saw the heaps of sutras stacked high in front of her. She remembered she had said some nonsense to the dough in the morning, and now cried a river of tears in remorse.

The next day, not being able to finish copying all of the scriptures, Fengjiu was carried to the Moonlight Garden on the 32nd level of Heaven.

The Moonlight Garden was covered with carefree trees; amid the tall canopies were countless extraordinary flowers. This was where Daode Tianzun¹³ of Taiqing taught his students.

Every young male immortal was gathered at this party. Fengjiu swept her eyes and estimated that there were about 100 people present. Some were in conversations with their colleagues, some were anxiously gazing to the garden entrance. It would be alright if it was only a couple of people, or even four or five, but Fengjiu was overwhelmed seeing dozens of them like this. She was audacious, but even then she took one startled step back, and another, and another. From nearby, Bai Qian's voice rose to tell the attendant next to her: "Ah, I think we should just tie her up. She must attend this party no matter what. We mustn't let her escape half-way."

Fengjiu's heart churned and she immediately turned and ran.

She leapt her way out of there. The maid followed her closely behind, matching her steps wit for wit and courage for courage. Fengjiu didn't know when she started to lose them either. She could only tell by the time she passed the dense foliage of the Sal trees, when the branches shook and pale yellow petals fell on her hair, behind her, the sound of chasing wind had stopped.

¹³ 道德天尊 Daode Tianzun – better known as Taishang Laojun, the Third Pure One of the Daoist Trinity who rules over the Grand Purity Realm known as 太清 Taiqing.

She heaved and looked back. There really wasn't anyone. There was only the Silver River running afar, with the sunset's rosy light faintly reflected on its shimmering water.

Careless talk leads to trouble. Her mouth had gotten her into trouble and she had had to transcribe Buddhist scriptures all day long. At present, with two Sal trees right in front of her eyes, her brain was filled with the *Long Agama*. What was written in it again? 'At that time, the Venerated Buddha reached parinirvana under the two Sal trees within the garden in Kushinagar.'" Those sorts of words...

Fengjiu brushed the petals from her hair and sighed as she walked. It wasn't a waste after all if she was able to remember such difficult passages. She looked around and realized how dirty and tired she was after the chase. She wondered if she should undress and take a dip under the Wangtian spring behind these Sal trees.

She contemplated for a long while.

The moon was finally rising from the East, and although it hadn't risen very high, and wasn't as romantic as would be seen by mortals gazing at it from afar, the cold silver moonlight managed to feebly spread over the rocks and flowers nearby. A few steps away, a thin fog shrouded over the azure water, diffusing a warm mystical energy. Fengjiu looked around; it was past the Dog hour (past 9 pm) and assumedly no one would come at this time. She took off her coat, then her tunic, then her undergarment, and stepped into the clear water.

She lowered herself and found that the hot water came up to her neck. Only now did Fengjiu let out a comfortable sigh. She looked at her palm and saw that many Sal petals had drifted in with the wind. She gathered them up and began to string them into a strand. Suddenly, she heard rustling sounds behind the large boulder.

Fengjiu's petal-gathering hands froze mid-air.

A slight ripple moved across the clear water surface, breaking the reflection of the moon. A figure in white emerged from behind the boulder in the

middle of the spring. Fengjiu ceased her breathing as she saw that figure wading the water and increasingly nearing closer. At last a tall person emerged from the mist, with long silver hair and a handsome countenance.

Fengjiu leaned against the rock wall. Even though she had always been thick-faced, this was definitely an embarrassing situation. Her face blanched white. But being Qingqiu's queen, she quickly regained composure and considered saying hello to him.

But how to say hellos in this situation was also an art in itself. Had she been here to look at the flowers, she could've asked him, "What great weather we have today. Is Your Majesty also here to enjoy the flowers?" But how could she raise her naked arm up to ask him, "What great weather we have today. Is Your Majesty also here to take a bath?"

While Fengjiu miserably pondered over what to say, Donghua leisurely walked to the other side of the bank without bothering to glance once at her.

Fengjiu thought to herself that perhaps Dijun didn't see her. Then she hadn't really lost face in front of him, had she?

She was about to heave in secret relief when Donghua Dijun had stopped short of going back on shore and in an instant, slid his cloak over her body.

At that exact moment, Fengjiu heard someone's voice from nearby. It sounded like Lord Liansong, who was awkwardly laughing. "Dear me, I'm so sorry. I saw nothing, nothing at all. I'm leaving now."

She numbly ripped Donghua's white cloak from her head. Her gaze went to the far distance where the carefree branches slightly shook under the moonlight. Donghua in only his inner tunic stood on shore looking at her for a length of time. At long last, he asked "What are you doing here?"

"Bathing," Fengjiu honestly answered him. Her face flushed pink from the water steam.

She suddenly remembered although the spring water here was blue in color, it was so clear one could see down to its streambed. Her face grew

red. Within seconds she looked as if she was steeped in boiling water. "You... close your eyes. You can't look this way. No, turn elsewhere... turn elsewhere quickly!"

Donghua unhurriedly looked at her from head to toe and finally, with great forbearance, turned to face another direction.

Fengjiu frantically looked at the heap of clothes on the shore. She didn't think she'd be in this situation when she took them off. Even her undergarment was so far away that if she wanted to pick it up, half her body would need to leave the water in order to retrieve it.

She was so befuddled she forgot that she was actually a fox. She needed only to shapeshift back into her original form and Donghua wouldn't be able to see a thing.

While she was still troubled, long slender fingers had brought her white skirt before her eyes. Donghua at this point still had his face turned. His long lashed eyes were still sealed. She was about to grab her skirt when she asked in horror, "How did you know I wanted my clothes?"

Normally in order to keep up with the image of Qingqiu's Queen, she always pretended to be generous and wise. Now she was showing her childishness like a lively young goddess.

Donghua paused and was going to withdraw his hand. Despite her fussy words, she immediately snatched her skirt at the speed of light. She quickly covered the sensitive areas on her body and came ashore to dress herself. Too embarrassed to bid goodbye, she quickly fled the scene.

Donghua called her back, "Hey, you forgot something."

She couldn't help but to look back, and saw Donghua bending down to pick up something. When she realized what it was, all the blood in her body had rushed to her head.

The thing Donghua was picking up was... an undergarment.

A lotus-pink undergarment.

Her undergarment.

Donghua's shirt was gaping slightly, exposing part of his collarbone. With an unchanging expression, he casually handed her the undershirt. Fengjiu didn't even know whether to receive it or not, feeling the whole world tumbling down.

While they remained in a deadlock, the adjacent tree rustled and out came the elegant figure of Liansong. "Umm, I forgot my fan. I came back to retrieve it but it looks like I'm interrupting you two. I'll come by to apologize another day. You guys... please do continue..."

Fengjiu wanted to cry so very badly. She quickly grabbed her undershirt and leapt over the wall. A breeze picked up the Sal petals and swirled them in the air.

Liansong faintly smiled and looked toward Donghua. "Aren't you going to run after her?" Then with a twinkle in his eyes, he asked, "The beauty you met by Chengtian Terrace the other day was Fengjiu of Qingqiu? But shouldn't you know? If you want to make her your queen, in the future you'll have to call that brat Yehua your uncle..."

Donghua stared at his robe and unhurriedly answered, "Some days ago I heard a rumor that you have fallen for Cheng'yu Yuanjun?"

Liansong closed the fan in his hand. "Hey..."

Donghua continued, "I'm thinking about making her my goddaughter. What do you think?"

Liansong, "..."

Fengjiu wasn't one to mull over the minor details in life. But what had happened wasn't minor at all. Who could tell what was going to be its consequences?

After losing her dignity in front of Donghua, Fengjiu couldn't bear to show her face elsewhere. She hid away for two days straight inside the little

dough's Qing'yun Palace, hoping someone would offer a kind consolation. Anyone but her aunt Bai Qian.

But it'd been so long yet no one came to clear the blockage in her mind. Fengjiu finally approached the dough.

"If you once liked a girl, and after many years you see her again..." Looking for an appropriate example, she at length asked, "and she finds out you're still wearing diapers. What would you do?"

The little dough stared at her and refuted, "I haven't worn diapers in a long time."

"I only said *if. If,*" Fengjiu quickly placated him.

The dough thought a while, his small face blushing red. Embarrassed, he turned away and said in discomfit, "Then that really is embarrassing. Only your dropping your undergarment when you see your crush again could really compare to something as embarrassing as that." Still uncomfortable, the dough said, "If that's the case, I'd rather ram my head into tofu and kill myself."

At first, Fengjiu had started to cheer up. But after hearing the little dough's words, she was depressed for several days more. By the end of the fourth day, Bai Qian sent a maid over with a message that the singers and dancers from Chengtian Terrace had recovered and would put together a play at Hebi Yuan, asking for her to come and watch. At this time, Fengjiu put aside her sorrow and finally left Qing'yun Palace.

On the stage within Hebi Garden was a herd of female generals in gaudy garments singing noisy lines.

Bai Qian with a white silk fan sidled near Fengjiu and said, "Heaven is kicking up a fuss in recent days over some interesting rumors. Have you heard any of them?" She coughed. "That is, of course, I'm not too keen on gossips."

With utter discernment, Fengjiu replied, "Of course you're not anxious over these things. I'm not either. But please, go ahead."

Bai Qian nodded and unhurriedly went on. "That's right, neither of us like minding other people's business, so you must not have thought of this either. The Donghua Dijun whom we all thought was an honorable man... we have indeed been fooled. It's a good thing you broke off your fate with him 300 years ago. It was fortunate Heaven had helped you cut this tie clean."

Fengjiu lifted her head attentively.

"They say he is hiding a remarkable beauty inside Taichen Palace, and that he's completely taken with her," Bai Qian said as she peeled a walnut.

Fengjiu placed her teacup down and lowered her eyes. "Then, this must be why His Majesty hadn't left Taichen Palace for so many years." She lightly laughed, "Of course, if next to him is a beautiful girl, he would never feel lonely without ever leaving home."

Bai Qian handed her a peeled walnut. "You need not pay too much attention. You two have nothing to do with each other anymore. I'm not telling you this to upset you."

Fengjiu picked up her teacup again and asked, "Who could this beauty be whom Dijun adores so much?"

"I asked Siming once, not that I wanted to. I don't really care about this matter that much. But Siming didn't know a thing either. After this secret spread, everyone started to guess at who the mysterious fairy is. But Donghua hadn't opened his mouth once regarding this. That's why they can't come up with any name besides his foster sister Zhi'he. But in my opinion, Zhi'he has been staying in the mortal realm all these years. I wouldn't think she's the one."

Fengjiu held her teacup and listened intently.

Bai Qian took another sip and continued. "As for the beauty, she does indeed exist. I heard Donghua had left Taichen Palace and gone to the hot spring with her last week. They were caught by Lord Liansong, which is why such rumors are now leaking."

Fengjiu fell over and crashed on the ground. "The hot spring...?" she asked as she supported her hand on the chair.

Bai Qian looked down at her in surprise and continued, "Are you surprised, too? I was shocked! This rumor has only spread a few days ago, but upon careful analysis, I think it's rather trustworthy. Do you know Cheng'yu Yuanjun whom Lord Liansong is in love with? Before I returned, it was Cheng'yu who took care of the little dough. I heard Cheng'yu was actually the illegitimate daughter sired by Donghua and this fairy."

In the middle of climbing up, Fengjiu fell to the ground once more.

Fengjiu knew well what her position was. She was a widow.

There was a famous mortal saying: 'scandals are aplenty in front of a widow's home'.

Fengjiu suddenly realized it wasn't because she was a proper widow that no scandal happened during her 300 years of widowhood. It was in fact because Qingqiu was a quiet place. On the other hand, she had only arrived on Jiuchongtian for a few days and already rumors were flying off the roof. But to hear such rumors now had made her somewhat worried. She felt she hadn't done her job of living a widow's life if she was caught in this scandal. Even 300 years ago, she wouldn't be happy to be associated with Donghua in such gossips.

Fengjiu excelled at one thing not even her aunt Bai Qian was good at. When came across a perplexing matter, Bai Qian would never be able to put it out of her mind. But Fengjiu wasn't like that; she dealt with things only as her ability allowed her to. In her opinion, her best trait wasn't cooking. Siming once praised her for being dogged in her efforts but also resolute once she decided to let go. She believed her behaviors had been worthy of his praise.

Previously, she hadn't prepared well; later she came to remember an adage she had invented. After living for 30,000 years, she had built up a substantial collection of proverbs from experience. She had to dig from her memory for the longest time before she remembered it: 'One should never

be attached to a man who is attached to other women, no matter how great a man he is. Even less so should one attach oneself to a man who is attached to other men'. She once lived and died for him yet he had never paid any attention to her. He might even have loved someone else instead. She lowered her own status to become a maid, spent centuries sweeping and dusting around his palace. She wasn't even qualified to speak to him. This whole matter – she could pretend it never existed. Naturally she should avoid whatever that could be avoided.

Recognizing this, she made sure to maintain a certain distance from him. But for some reason, that distance was closing on itself more and more. She thought for a long time and decided she needed to put more effort into staying away from him from now on.

But just as she came to this decision, she discovered that the citrine bracelet she had always worn on her wrist, which was gifted by Qingti, had disappeared. It was a very important bracelet.

She carefully recalled past events and figured she must have lost it behind Donghua's Taichen Palace that night.

Before they maintain a greater distance, she had to come see him for one last time.

But this was truly a stormy business. She must be absolutely careful, lest she ends up alarming the people by his side. How complicated.

Fengjiu evaluated the situation and remembered that the fifth of May was just around the corner. Although Donghua was living in seclusion on the 13th celestial sky, he still had responsibilities he hadn't relinquished to Tianjun yet, such as keeping the immortal records. There was a saying: 'Wear green skirt, come to Heaven's gates; give thanks to Heaven and Earth, pay homage to Dongjun.' Every year when mortals ascended Heaven as newly minted fairies, they would need to make a stop at Qing

Yun Hall¹⁴, and Donghua would be the one to award them with an appropriate title.

As had always been the practice, Donghua Dijun would stay behind to check the recordings in the Lianxin Mirror hung in Qing Yun Hall when everyone took leave toward the end. Fengjiu surmised that there was no better opportunity to come see him than at that exact time.

On the fifth day of May, luan birds¹⁵ filled the air with their songs and Mandarava flowers¹⁶ blossomed in the rain.

Fengjiu had planned to camp outside of Qing Yun Hall since earlier, but the little dough had hung onto her for an entire morning. The easily abandoned dough was getting smarter and smarter these days. When she finally arrived on the 36th sky, she could hear no sound indicating a ceremony was in conduct.

Fengjiu thought that court must have been dismissed. Pretending to be dabbing her sweat, she covered half of her face with a handkerchief and asked the immortal standing guard at the doors, “His Majesty... is he inside by himself?”

The guard was a stammering man, but he was a responsible stammering man. He blocked the entrance and asked her, “Dare I a... ask... for your name?”

¹⁴ This hall is called 青雲 (qīng yún) or Blue Clouds which is different from the dough's residence which is called 慶雲 (qìng yún), or Auspicious Clouds.

¹⁵ 鸞鳥 luan niao – a divine bird with red plumage and five-colored striping; an omen of peace; in the fourth volume of 淮南子 *Huainanzi*, it is said the 羽嘉 yujia gave birth to the 飛龍 feilong, which gave birth to the 鳳皇 fenghuang, which gave birth to the 鸞 luan, which then gave birth to all other feathered creatures.

¹⁶ Mandarava flowers – a celestial flower often mentioned in Buddhist texts; named after a princess who renounced her royal birthright in order to practice the Dharma

Fengjiu pulled her kerchief over her entire face this time, leaving only her chin, and replied, "Bai Qian of Qingqiu."

The guard bowed respectfully and said, "Your Highness, His Majesty is... is indeed in... inside by himself."

Fengjiu sighed in relief and thanked him while saying: "I need to talk to him in private so please don't let anyone else come in. I'll thank you generously after this." Then she proceeded into the gate.

The guard didn't dare to stop her, but he wasn't ecstatic in letting her through either. He scratched his head in frustration.

"Are you that happy to see me?" Fengjiu asked as she turned around. After some moments of thoughts, she added, "Should I sign an autograph for you?"

The guard shook his head rapidly and said, "His Majesty, by himself... in...inside..."

Fengjiu nodded in comprehension after a moment of silence. "Has he been waiting for some time? How considerate of you. I'll enter, then." And she hurriedly stepped in.

When Fengjiu's back disappeared in the distance, the guard finally spoke the words which got stuck in his throat, "By himself, inside, heading a meeting w... with everyone...cannot, cannot... be disturbed."

Qing Yun Hall on the 36th level of Heaven was the only place on Jiuchongtian surrounded by cerulean clouds. Built with tourmaline beams and amethyst walls, it had always been an ornate and magnificent building. But its polished exterior was by no means its brilliance. Its true virtue was its soundproof quality. Fengjiu, however, wasn't aware of this. She listened for a while, and after not hearing a sound, decided Donghua must indeed be alone inside.

Fengjiu was taught personally by Bai Zhen since a young age that if she wanted to collect debts, she should start by exchanging pleasantries. But in case this failed, she should concentrate on simply three words: quick,

accurate, and relentless. The bracelet was surely lost behind Donghua Dijun's home but she couldn't disregard the chance that he would refute her claim. Hence, if she wanted it back, she would have to cram her facts into his head and make him confess at the outset.

Fengjiu recited the three words 'quick', 'accurate', and 'relentless' again, inhaled quickly and... raised her leg to kick open the hall's doors. When her leg had stretched out half-way, she suddenly changed her mind. She stepped back and used her hand instead. Her voice became the only sound within the hall, loud and clear. "The other night I lost my citrine bracelet. Might it be with Your Majes..." Her words abruptly froze on her tongue.

There were people in Qing Yun Hall.

Not just people, but a horde of them.

Fengjiu numbly stared at the two long lines of bowed courtiers. They were wearing scholar robes; it was obvious they were in the middle of being granted various celestial titles. Underneath the imperial seat was a kneeling fairy; in his hand was a bamboo tablet¹⁷. He had only come before Donghua to recite his various merits.

At this point everyone had collected himself and looked back at Fengjiu with fear at her audacious words. The only person who showed no emotion was the same one sitting high on the golden throne. Donghua propped his arms on the arm rest with disinterest. He gazed down at her from high above.

Fengjiu was startled for a moment. She pushed the hall's doors and struggled to say with calm: "Pardon me. Sleepwalking... careless...got lost."

Donghua's voice came to her at an unhurried pace. "That bracelet... was indeed left at my place."

¹⁷笏 (hu) is a tablet made of jade, ivory, or bamboo held by officials whenever they attended court.

Fengjiu tripped over the doorstep.

Donghua deliberately took from his sleeve a delicate and exquisite white jade hairpin and casually said, "You forgot your hairpin too."

Someone in the hall swallowed nervously. Fengjiu dropped to the floor and played dead.

The entire hall was drowned in silence. Donghua's voice rang out again, utterly calm and slow. "And here's the flower pin you dropped at the hot spring." He paused, then with natural aplomb, said, "Come and take them."

Fengjiu covered her face and dragged herself up from the door. Horrified, she replied, "I'm really sleepwalking... really came to the wrong place."

Donghua propped his cheek and said, "There's also..." while looking as if he was about to take something out.

Fengjiu stopped her cries and immediately put away her miserable face in exchange for a serious one. "Oh, look, I'm suddenly awake. My mind is completely clear now."

"Perhaps due to the profound aura here," she then added as if she had only realized such truth.

She came forward and bowed ceremoniously. "Indeed I had come to retrieve some things from you, I didn't go to the wrong place. I apologize for inconveniencing you with keeping them."

She was embarrassed and bashful at the same time. "How reckless of me to have disturbed everyone. I'm so very sorry. I will make amends another day."

She did each of her actions so fluidly that she herself couldn't help but be surprised. Donghua still gave away no reaction. Everyone else followed suit and kept still.

Fengjiu gritted her teeth and stepped onto the royal platform. Donghua gazed up to see her distressed look. His eyes flickered with a faint smile

which disappeared just as quickly as it had come. Donghua offered his right hand. In it were a citrine bracelet, a white jade hairpin, and a white flower pin.

Fengjiu was somewhat confused.

Donghua unhurriedly said, "Why aren't you taking them? Or are you waiting for me to personally hand them to you?"

Fengjiu hurried to take them, and with false regard as if she was receiving an important edict. Afterward, she even remembered to exit in the same respectful bowing position. When she got to the doors, all the embarrassment shot to her face as she immediately sprinted away.

Everyone in Qing Yun Hall remained standing in utter solemnity. The immortal kneeling on the ground was still dazedly staring after Fengjiu's distant shadow. Fortunately Donghua's elderly steward wasn't distracted by Fengjiu. Trying to help the kneeling youth, he asked, "You were telling us about your battle against the sea dragon five hundred years ago. When the princess of the Zhongrong Kingdom whom you rescued insisted on marrying you, you declined her offer..." He leaned forward excitedly and asked, "And then what?" Donghua cast him a glance and he wisely cleared his throat and tempered his voice. "What... happened after that? Please continue your report..."

That night after court was dismissed at Qing Yun Hall, as had always been the tradition, Tianjun ordered for a celebratory banquet in the Moonlight Garden.

The young fairies who came to Heaven for the first time naturally felt amazed at everything they saw.

Under a carefree canopy yet to flower, a clever-looking fairy whispered to another, "You've seen so many Heavenly immortals today, but have you seen either one from the Qingqiu Kingdom?" Then he added in a secretive tone, "I heard in attendance tonight will be the Lady and her niece Fengjiu. I heard the both of them are renowned beauties. So beautiful are they that even the fairies in Heaven pale in comparison."

The young fairy who was spoken to was the very same one who knelt on the ground this morning. After his merits were listed, he was appointed to the Zhenren rank. Using his mortal surname, he was now called Chen Zhenren.

Chen Zhenren's face turned crimson red as he replied inapplicably, "The fairy... who burst into Qing Yun Hall this morning... will she be there too?"

The other fairy covered his mouth in surprise and whispered back, "I've asked around, and it seems likely she is Dijun's foster sister, Princess Zhi'he. Judging from this morning, Dijun's feelings for his foster sister aren't of the ordinary kind." He then exclaimed, "My, she's quite lovely. Quite lovely indeed. Even I who usually do not give into mortal lust had to gaze at her in awe. You were stunned, of course, but..." he slapped Chen Zhenren's shoulder, "you and I are humans who gained immortality. According to the rules, even if Dijun didn't have any feelings for his sister, we can only admire her from far away."

Chen Zhenren dropped his head in bleakness.

The Moonlight Garden on the 32nd sky hung higher than the moon itself. For that reason, moon beams did not reach the garden. Instead, the entire place was illuminated as bright as day by hanging night pearls on the carefree trees.

Jiuchongtian had a bad common practice. The highly-ranked deities always came to these parties exactly on time, as if to say they were swamped with work and could not get away any sooner. Fortunately Donghua and Liansong weren't part of this group. They were always either very early or very late, or they didn't show up at all. They were never on time...

This time these two graced everyone with their presence even though there was still ample time left.

The young maids had arranged a table for them behind a dense tree so as to not let the others feel uncomfortable with their grand presence.

When Chen Zhenren and the other fairy were talking, they had been standing near this tree. Each of their words had been heard by the two deities sitting behind it.

At this time, Donghua was disassembling the Haotian tower which Liansong had just given him. The Haotian tower was a magical weapon that could vanquish any demon and ghoul. Liansong brought it to Donghua so they could tweak it into a weapon which could subdue even the gods. His goal was to have it ranked first in the Magical Weapon Record, pushing Moyuan's newly developed Jiulihu down a notch.

Lord Liansong placed his fan away and poured some wine for the both of them. With a smile, he said, "I heard you teased Fengjiu in front of everyone in Qing Yun Hall earlier. Why don't you sit down and tell me why your loyal steward Zhonglin had to run to me for advice on protecting your honor?"

Donghua gazed at the tower in his hand and said, "Asking advice from you? Was he still sleepy?"

"I'm not going to trade words with you." When he finished a cup of wine, he suddenly recalled something. "There's something important I need to tell you. I forgot about it when we went off topic." He tapped his fan onto the nearby wine cup and continued. "There seems to be some movement in the South by the Demon Clan."

Donghua kept his eyes on the newly disassembled Haotian tower and asked, "What happened?"

Liansong leaned back against his chair. His eyes twinkled as he slowly replied, "Who else but one of the seven Demon lords, Yan Chiwu, do you still remember him? The one who came to duel with you because of your betrothal to the Demon Clan's eldest princess."

Still with nonchalance, he continued, "He used the Soul Locking Jade to trap you into the Wicked Lotus Sphere, making you suffer and lose your face for a while there, remember that too?"

With more delight, he went on: "If a baby fox hadn't appeared out of nowhere to help you, you might have lost half of your lifetime's power."

Then he summed it all up with a sense of regret: "Of course you finally broke out of the trap and gave Yan Chiwu such a brutal lesson even his parents couldn't recognize him. But he's still one of the seven Demon lords. Such disgrace was too much for him to bear. He now wants to have a rematch so he can wipe away the old humiliation."

Donghua's eyes moved slightly as he blankly said, "I'm waiting for his invitation."

"I thought you have long retired from worldly concerns," Liansong said in surprised.

"Or do you still think he kidnapped your baby fox?" He frowned. "Didn't you personally make a trip to the Demon Clan three hundred years ago and verified yourself that the baby fox wasn't there?"

Sighing, he said, "Speaking of which... this world is so big, can't you just get another fox?"

A moment passed when he asked in recognition, "Isn't Fengjiu of Qingqiu also a red fox? Well, she's a nine-tailed red fox, but a red fox nonetheless... Don't tell me for that for this reason, you're..."

Donghua leaned his cheek on his hand and looked past the dense foliage. "They're two entirely different matters."

His eyes incidentally paused on a scowling Fengjiu who was now following Bai Qian into the garden. She wore a white dress, her hair adorned with a white flower pin. Her expression was icy cold. When she didn't talk, she looked rather nice and proper.

Bai Qian had bad eyesight but Fengjiu's was excellent. With one glance she could tell Donghua was leaning against his chair looking at her from behind the verdure.

Fengjiu retreated and held onto Bai Qian's arm to plead. "Being a widow, I think it's best to adhere to propriety and not bring myself into the spotlight..."

Bai Qian quickly cut her short. "So you think coming to a dinner with your aunt isn't as proper as helping Zheyang tame the Chiyan Beast for Fourth Brother to make into a new riding animal. If that's the case..."

Fengjiu trembled and took hold of Bai Qian's hand more tightly. "Luckily regulations for widows aren't that strict. It's good to come out every now and then..." She stammered for a while and lied, "It's good for one's health and mind."

Bai Qian smiled brightly and nodded, "You're exactly right."

The two royal ladies of Qingqiu stepped into the garden with dignity, one after the other. The new immortals turned to look at them in fascination. Fortunately the banquet attendants were used to seeing these two beauties and quickly led them to their seats.

Behind the carefree tree, Liansong tapped his fan onto the stone table and said to Donghua, "What are your true intentions toward her? Do you only feel she's pretty, or..."

Donghua stopped looking. A smile appeared in his eyes, and just as quickly went away. "She's indeed very interesting."

Liansong used the aptitude of a renowned lady-killer to interpret his words, but after half a day, still couldn't fully understand. "Interesting meaning...?"

At this very moment, an official by the throne above announced: "His Majesty the Lord of Heaven has arrived~~~"

Liansong sighed and stood up, telling Donghua: "Put the Haotian tower away."

Tonight's banquet at the Moonlight Garden was an intimate dinner.

It was an intimate dinner, but it was not comfortable in the least.

As time passed each Tianjun ascended the throne and descended it. Only Donghua Dijun sat firmly and unchangingly on the Daoist Trinity holy land.

Over the years there had been a few times when even Tianjun was made the topic of conversations over drinks, but none of it had ever involved Donghua. This was the first time there was a rumor about him. It flew straight from the 1st sky to the 36th sky into Tianjun's ears like a shooting star.

The first victim was of course Donghua. The other, because everyone lacked imagination, was poor innocent Princess Zhi'he. But whatever Zhi'he was thinking, she never refuted each time someone came to ask her, replying instead with only a silent smile.

The incumbent Tianjun had a habit of overestimating himself.

He thought he was a sovereign who understood his people well.

The well-known story was that Donghua was in love with Princess Zhi'he. Because she was also a Heavenly deity, Tianjun thought it was time to bring Zhi'he back, as a favor to Donghua.

When he made up his mind, he decided it should be announced at this semi-intimate, semi-formal party while Zhi'he hadn't yet left.

But he must send down his decree in a natural way such that no one would suspect of his favoritism toward Donghua, and at the same time revealing the fact that Donghua would now owe him a favor. Having heard that Zhi'he was a talented dancer, he finally decided to order eighteen fairies to dance in the background for Zhi-he's favorite 'Crane on Heaven' dance.

Being a smart girl, Zhi'he did not disappoint and danced 'Crane on Heaven' as if it was 'Phoenix on Heaven.' Additionally there wasn't just one phoenix; there was a whole flock of them, flying straight to the ninth layer of clouds. Everyone from below the stage was mesmerized with wide-eye wonder.

When the dance came to its end, Tianjun led with a few claps, and immediately thunderous sounds of applause followed. Tianjun looked to the stage and asked despite already knowing the answer, "Was that the dancing fairy Princess Zhi'he who was sent to Mount Qilin three hundred years ago?" Everyone naturally concurred. Tianjun looked to be in thoughts as he said, "I can't believe a banished fairy could be so talented. I deem three hundred years of penitence in the mortal realm have been enough. She may return to Jiuchongtian tomorrow." Then he looked to Donghua and said, "Lord Donghua, what do you think?"

What a well-staged play.

Standing on stage, Princess Zhihe's skirt fabric fluttered like a dreamlike illusion as she also silently looked to her foster brother.

Donghua was again playing with the Haotian tower. Upon hearing this, he briefly glanced at her and nodded. "Sounds good."

At that exact moment a cracking sound came from the diagonal side of the garden. By the time they looked over, Fengjiu's porcelain teacup was already lying on the tabletop in four pieces.

Donghua was caught astounded. Liansong hid behind his fan and prodded his chin. "Did you see? She crushed the cup with just one hand. That's scary good."

Fengjiu was sure the moment Donghua said, "Sounds good," Zhi-he's lips had smirked into a provoking smile as she faced her.

She still remembered her father Bai Yi's teaching: 'Although you are young, remember your station and responsibilities. Don't fight with the others or let them turn you into a joke. It's alright to disgrace yourself, but never let your position be dishonored.'

She had kept these words close to her heart for three hundred years. Even on the rare occasion that someone should offend her, she really did train herself to have a generous mind. But as she faced Zhi'he this time, these

everyday courtesies could die for all she cared. This little princess from Taichen Palace had really wronged her, carving a scar in her heart.

This old story dated back to more than two thousand years ago.

She was but an ignorant kid at the time. She had gone alone to Mount Qinyao in the southern land and thoughtlessly provoked a tiger demon. It was about to devour her when Donghua Dijun passed by and saved her life. She devoted herself to Donghua from that moment on. To repay his kindness, she ended up owing Siming another. She snuck into Taichen Palace on the 13th sky and became a maidservant there. She tried her best but she did not have much luck. Moreover, Donghua's foster sister, Princess Zhi'he, had laid all sorts of obstacles to make things difficult for her. Donghua didn't pay much attention to his domestic affairs. He did not have a queen either, so everything within the palace was overseen by Zhi'he. Fengjiu's days went on with hardship.

Later, Donghua somehow got tricked into the Wicked Lotus Sphere, granting her at last a fated chance. From a very young age, she had always been as determined as a boy. To save Donghua from danger, she didn't think twice about trading her appearance, her voice, and her precious nine tails to turn into a baby fox. Well, she might have had an ulterior motive. She thought that as with the love she had given him in return for his kindness, he might love her back in return for her kindness. After 2000 years of hard work, she was finally reaping some reward.

But life was always unpredictable.

After her wounds got better, Donghua implicitly allowed her to stay by his side day and night to keep him company. She really felt those were some of her happiest days. Although as a red baby fox she had lost all magical abilities, she was still utterly satisfied. She was happy even in her dreams.

That night she had a good sleep. In the morning she was woken up by foraging birds pecking on her windows. On her pillow was Donghua's handwriting. He wrote that if she woke up, she should come by the atrium so he could feed her good food. She happily jumped out of bed and

skipped all the way to the atrium, shaking the only tail she had left. When she got there, she was surprised to find Zhi'he in front of the flower beds crying as she argued with Donghua over something. She didn't think it was the right moment to come over so she quietly hid away behind a jujube tree nearby. Because she was well-raised, she didn't want to eavesdrop on their conversation. She lowered her head and covered her sharp ears with her paws. They continued to argue for a long time, most of what was said was from Zhi'he. Her cries made Fengjiu uncomfortable. Their conversation was finally coming to an end. She slowly lowered her paws down when she suddenly heard Donghua spoke in a low voice. "I promised foster father I'd look after you, so I will never abandon you. Why do you have to be jealous of a pet?"

Long after Donghua left, she crawled out from behind the jujube tree. Zhi'he smilingly said to her, "You see, you are but a pet so how can you dream of having my foster brother? Don't you think it's rather laughable?"

She was a little hurt but she kept strong. To have to personally hear Donghua say such things was indeed hurtful, but he was only speaking the truth. To pursue Donghua this way really wasn't the best approach. She herself had wanted more. But this was only the beginning. They say when it rains it pours. A string of memories she never wanted to remember flooded back and woke her up from her beautiful dream. One after another, each was excruciatingly painful. She had been braver than her peers of the same age, but she was still after all a baby. With all the hard times and grievances, eventually she became disheartened.

Zhi'he won emphatically this round of psychological warfare. She hadn't cared that she had lost to Zhi'he; she was only sad she couldn't make Donghua like her. But she had no idea why Zhi'he disliked her so much. Even when she had decided to leave Jiuchongtian, she still made life hard for her. On the night she was leaving Jiuchongtian, Zhi'he in a red bridal gown came to her. Pretending to be kind, she gently petted her head and said, "I've been with foster brother for 90,000 years. He was the one who raised me since the day I was born, and today I am finally going to marry

him. I'm very happy. You're a kind little fox, are you happy for me too?" Then with a faint smile, she taunted, "What, are you not? But of course, you've never been."

Fengjiu still remembered how bright and full the moon was that night. Stepping on its reflection made her feel as though she was dragging her feet through the river of fate. That river was deep and round, as though it had wanted to drown her.

Old memories came back like ephemeral fog. Fengjiu glanced to the stage where Zhi'he had just completed her dance. Three hundred years were still too short. Her old acquaintance hadn't changed.

In those days, despite Zhihe's bullying, she remained stubborn about Donghua. She stupidly viewed those insults as her trials from Heaven, and Zhi'he was Heaven's instrument to test her. After leaving Jiuchongtian and becoming somewhat sober, she finally realized Zhi'he was simply her arch rival. For centuries she had let herself bullied for no reason. But if she were to especially race back to Jiuchongtian only to return these pain and grievances, it would be quite petty. How could she avenge herself while appearing magnanimous? She thought long and careful, but after not finding a satisfactory solution, she was going to quit altogether.

But it was as if Heaven understood her 300-year grudge and especially arranged today for her. So how could she disappoint Heaven's good will, especially when her opponent was smiling so provocatively. If she didn't make things a little difficult for her, she would be doing her pretty smile a disservice.

When the young maid brought to her another cup, Zhihe's sneering smile seemed to intensify. She looked pleased with herself as the aggravating beams pooled in the corners of her eyes.

Fengjiu received the new cup. Seeing Zhihe's increased provocation, her mouth also curved back into a smile.

Next to her, Auntie Bai Qian glanced to Zhi'he then glanced back at her. She scolded softly, "Tianjun is discussing official matters with his subjects.

You are now the queen of Qingqiu. You have the fortune to witness his supremacy and listen to his teachings, yet how can you not only be inattentive, but even smiley at his words?" It sounded as though her aunt was scolding her, but this duet the two of them sang to fool her rigid father wasn't something that could be practiced in a century or two.

In a split second, Fengjiu had caught on. She placed her hands together respectfully. "I wouldn't dare. I was only thinking... when a Qingqiu subject is cast out, he would have to accomplish numerous feats to be reinstated back to the ranks of the immortals. Recently, uncle-in-law mentioned unrest in the southern lands. I've always thought Princess Zhi'he as a water god would be sent to battle. I was worried she would be sent to the lands in the south and only allowed back to Jiuchongtian after clinching victory. But that was indeed too severe of a punishment. Dancing one dance was much better, was it not? I thought my worries had been for naught, so I smiled in relief at first. Afterwards, I realized how just and benevolent Heaven's laws are, which was why I smiled again in veneration. But then I thought that fortunately Princess Zhi'he can be forgiven due to her talents, but how will a talentless fairy ever make up for her misdeed should she commit one? For this reason, I smiled again in puzzlement."

The deities who were present could all hear from her words that this Qingqiu monarch was casting aside their Lord's face. She was deliberately refuting his words yet her remarks had been utterly sincere, utterly modest, and utterly polite. Graciously, Fengjiu placed her hands together and faced the deities. "I come from a rustic land so I'm not very knowledgeable. How embarrassing I've made myself in front of everyone." She sat back down, and from a distance made the same gesture to Tianjun.

Liansong nudged Donghua with his fan and said, "She's quite your peer in spewing bitter words. My father must be having a headache right now."

Donghua turned the teacup inside his palm and looked toward Fengjiu's pretense. "How can that be? I'm much more succinct than she is."

On his high seat, Tianjun couldn't have guessed things would turn out this way. But he was the ruler of Heaven after all. He had had so much practice, he could turn his face quicker than one turned pages in a book. With a sweep across the courtyard, his imperial gaze had taken in the situation. In a deep voice, he said, "The questions Her Highness of Qingqiu posed are indeed very valid. Jiuchongtian's laws have always been fair. If Zhi'he wants to return to Heaven she naturally must acquire enough merits." He paused, then continued, "Of course the laws are clearly written, but our understanding of the strange movements in the South land are currently uncertain. We'll revisit this topic once we have a firmer grasp of the situation."

Fengjiu untiringly kept up with her proper ways. Turning to Zhi'he in the direction of the stage, she let out a satisfied smile. Zhihe's face instantly turned as white as a sheet of paper. A pair of big almond eyes was fiercely staring at her, looking as if flames could shoot out at any moment. The full court was in silence.

An unhurried cold voice suddenly rang out, "I'll go in her place."

His fingers which were caressing the Haotian tower paused as he glanced up. "If she has to go to the battlefield in order to return to Heaven." Zhi'he lifted her head. Her pale face flushed pink as life was brought back to her eyes.

Tianjun also looked up and casually swept his eyes across the people below. Besides Donghua, Bai Qian was the other high-ranking deity. As he was about to ask for her opinion, she stopped fanning her fan and put on an exceedingly warm smile. "In Qingqiu I have heard that Princess Zhihe's parents have both passed away. They fostered Dijun, and it is clear Dijun remembers their kindness."

It seemed decided. Fengjiu coldly glanced at Donghua then Zhi'he. She put on a sincere smile and played along with her aunt. "How touching His Majesty's love for his sister is." Then without further interest, she went on biting melon seeds. Except for her, no one else dared to gainsay Donghua in front of everyone.

The immortals buzzed with excitement. Most didn't understand what was going on, they were just glad to have something to watch. They only knew one thing, which was that they could now verify the rumors which were flying around before. For example, early this morning Donghua had teased someone inside Qing Yun Hall. And as it turned out, that person wasn't his foster sister Zhi'he but rather the famous queen from Qingqiu – Her Highness Fengjiu. However, there were also some who were clever enough and whispered because they sat far away: “Actually, this is what I think. Why don't you tell me if it sounds right. This is probably a fight for love between the sister and the wife. The sister might harbor secret affections for her brother, and the wife can't stand the little sister, hence...” Later, this 'perceptive' fairy, due to his rare ability to logically explain matters, became Siming's assistant in managing the book of fate. Siming held him in high regard; his future seemed very bright.

Bai Qian only attended this time because her husband Yehua couldn't.

Passing ten miles of peach blossoms, Zheyen came to visit yesterday. This high deity was single-minded in protecting the Bai siblings. It seemed he had come to lecture Yehua on one thing or another. Because Yehua was occupied with more important things on his hands, his wife had to go in his place.

Bai Qian found it troublesome and disliked to socialize. After she saw Tianjun sneaking away after three rounds of drinks as always, so did she. She wanted to pull Fengjiu away as well, but thinking how Fengjiu shut herself all day long inside Qing'yun Palace with the little dough, she only stopped by to give her a reminder to be careful.

Her reminder was of no use. Fengjiu drank openly tonight. She accepted toasts from everyone, and if she liked them, she'd even offer back a cup. They all praised her. As the saying goes, 'wine reveals character'. Everyone agreed she was a chivalrous soul. However, tonight's banquet was a friendly gathering. The drinks were made from fermented fruits. They tasted light, and although they were slow they were quite potent. How could Fengjiu have known? She thought she was drinking fruit

punch, so what was there to worry about? Furthermore, she felt as though her heart was caught in a fire tonight, so she needed to douse that fume using the juice.

She drank and drank, finally feeling light-headed. She couldn't distinguish the past and the present, people and places. She only knew someone was saying something about the party. Then one after another, people came to say goodbye. She started to feel confused, but keeping up with her dignity, she still replied to each of them.

In a short while there were no more sounds in the garden. Only the night pearls' light remained cast among the carefree trees, weaving with the shadows in a chaotic clutter.

Fengjiu stared at the drink in her hand. She'd always behaved with moderation when she was drunk, so no one ever really detected her drunken state. Her movements merely became a bit slower, and occasionally if she was too drunk there would be no reaction at all. For instance, her head was feeling empty this time. Who was she? What was she doing here? What was in her cup? She didn't know the answer to any of these questions.

She gave the liquid a taste and reckoned it tasted safe. Then suddenly she became thirsty. The wine cup had seemed a bit small, perhaps she should exchange it for a teacup. After some additional thoughts, it was perhaps better to use a teapot altogether. At this moment, out of the blue, she heard a series of steady footsteps.

Accompanied by a faint fragrance of white sandalwood, the footsteps stopped in front of her.

She lifted her head curiously and saw Donghua who had returned after having left, slightly bending down to look at her. His gaze paused on her fingers. "What are you still doing here?"

Her sluggish brain started to turn at full speed the instant she saw him. She suddenly remembered who he was, and who she was herself. But those memories of 300 years ago were playing tricks on her mind. She

couldn't remember anything which happened in the past 300 years. Instead, she felt as though she was back at Taichen Palace this very instant. That handsome face, those deep eyes, and that silver mane belonged to Donghua, and she was the little fox who loved him, who found all sorts of way to stay by his side.

She stared at him for half a day and at last raised her cup to show him: "Drinking juice."

Donghua lowered his head to her raised hand and took a whiff, then looked up to her. "This is wine."

She studied him for a spell again. A puzzled expression appeared on her face. She saw the tower in his hand which resembled a weapon and ignored the question of her drink to skip to another question. "Are you having another fight with someone?" She contemplated for a moment then said, "Then take me with you. I promise I won't give you any trouble." She forgot she was in her human form and thought that she was still a little fox he could conveniently hold in his arms. She gestured with her hand: "I'm so teeny tiny, you can fit me anywhere, can't you?"

The flower pin on her hair loosened and fell onto the table. Donghua sat down beside her, picked it up, and handed it to her. "You're drunk."

She stared intently at the pin for a long time without recognizing it. Her eyes moved away. Then after another eternity she prettily nodded her head and said, "Maybe a little." Then she clutched her head and complained of feeling dizzy. She seemed to truly be dizzy because her body promptly fell over to the side.

Donghua caught her and helped her up. When he saw her finally sitting straight, he asked, "Can you still find your way back? I'll take you home."

"Liar," she studied the cup and switched topics, "you went to teach someone a lesson..." She looked out dazedly then held her head and continued, "What was his name again?" She sounded grievous now: "You told me to wait for you but you never came back," then accusingly, "it was still me who went looking for you."



Donghua was still trying to figure out how to slide the hairpin back in her hair. He tried out different arrangements and skeptically asked her, “When was this?” She lowered her head obediently and let Donghua play with her hair. “It was very recent.”

“Don’t move around,” he softly told her.

She stopped moving and said with conviction, “I’m surely not wrong.”

"I have excellent memory."

"Foxes have excellent memories."

Donghua slid the pin into her hair and admired it for a while before saying:
"You really are mistaken. Who am I?"

"Dijun~" She stood up. Her weak round eyes looked at him for a long time then as if she had remembered something at this very instant, said,
"Donghua. But you're the worst."

He was a little surprised to hear her address him by his name. Then amused, he asked, "Why?"

"You said I was only a pet," she answered honestly, eyes misty. "When I left, you didn't stop me."

Confused, Donghua said, "I don't remember. I..." He hadn't finished when she fell forward into his chest. It turned out she was already too drunk.

Donghua lowered to look at her. She probably said everything in a drunken stupor. He didn't need to mind any of it. The light emitted from the night pearls cast over her face. He didn't know why she drank so much; she had been prudent up until now.

He carried her and flew back to Qing'yun Palace. She unconsciously buried her head deep within his embrace. Her long slender fingers gently tugged at the collar of his robe. Her usually icy forehead with the phoenix blossom mark was especially enchanting tonight. Then there was her innocent flushed face... she did not seem like a superior queen at this moment. But there was that one thing. What did she say? He thought and thought. Yes, she said 'pet'.

Bonus 1: Discovering Donghua Dijun

Tangqi Gongzi created the 三生三世 world by interweaving existing mythological immortals and beasts with ones which she made up herself. Everyone must've wondered at one point on who this almighty Donghua Dijun was, and whether he was an original deity in Chinese mythology.

As a matter of fact, he was.

The earliest incarnation of 東華帝君 Donghua Dijun can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn Warring States period where he is mentioned in the shamanic elegies of 楚辭 *The Songs of Chu* as 東皇太一 God of the Eastern Sky or 東君 Lord of the East. This ancient Sun God is generally considered to have morphed into a later version known as 東王公 Dong Wanggong or, wait for it, the Emperor Grandfather of the East.

Dong Wanggong is said to have been born from the Blue Sea since the dawn of time and is the creator of all things. He is the Yang counterpart of the yin-yang duality to the Yin of 西王母 Xi Wangmu, or Queen Mother of the West who is better known as the lady who owns the Immortal Peach Orchard. In other words, they are married to one another despite living on opposite sides of the world. He is keeper of the immortality records, and new fairies will have to go through him before they may enter the gates of Heaven.

So what does this Dong Wanggong look like? In 神異經 *Classic of the Mystic*, it is recorded that Dong Wanggong is ten meters tall, his hair is white, his body is of a human, his face of a bird, his tail of a tiger, and that he also rides on a black bear. Of course when he was later adopted into the Daoist pantheon, he eventually gained a more classic Daoist look.



Now that your image of Dijun is thoroughly crushed... let's get back to the story!

Chapter 03

Early next morning, Fengjiu rubbed her temple as she found her way out of bed in Qing'yun Palace.

Still not fully awake, she looked to the long purple robe in her hand and asked the little dough, "What the heck is this?"

The little dough was having breakfast with his parents by the wisteria tree within the courtyard. Upon hearing Fengjiu, he bit on his spoon thoughtfully for a long time, and when it finally dawned on him, punched his fists together in recognition and said, "That's brother Donghua's coat."

Yehua's chopsticks holding hand paused as he arched an eyebrow, "When I was little I called Donghua uncle."

The little dough started to open his mouth, but chose to close it again. With his head hung, he worked away at counting their generation gap.

Fengjiu froze on the spot. She stared at the robe in her hand, then walked over to the door and checked the sign atop to see whether this was Qing'yun Palace or not. Her eyes returned to the little dough as she stuttered, "How... how did this happen?"

Bai Qian was helping the little dough to another bowl of porridge. "It was actually nothing," she assured Fengjiu. "You were drunk last night so Donghua was being kind by bringing you back to Qing'yun Palace. But you were so drunk you wouldn't let go of his coat. Since you couldn't be wakened, he had no choice but to leave his coat here."

Fengjiu gave these words some thought and said with comprehension, "It was probably on his way then. Since it wasn't anything ambiguous, neither my or his reputation will be compromised."

Bai Qian held her tongue and told Fengjiu in hesitation, "Except... you know too that Donghua couldn't have stayed the night at Qing'yun Palace. He already gave you his coat, and there was nothing from the dough's residence that would fit him. The dough came to me to borrow some from Yehua."

"That sounds reasonable enough," Fengjiu nodded her head and stepped over, wanting to join them for breakfast.

Bai Qian coughed and continued, "I was sleeping... a bit too soundly. The dough had called out from the courtyard. You know how loud children can be. I'm afraid the entire Xiwu Palace had heard him..."

Fengjiu stopped in her track and turned to look at the dough. "What did you call out?"

"Only what was true," the dough replied with pursed lips.

Fengjiu took a deep breath.

Reenacting the scene, the dough went on: "Donghua gege carried Fengjiu jiejie back to Qing'yun Palace. Fengjiu jiejie kept pulling him back and won't let him go. Donghua gege had to hold her for a long time. Oh yeah, he also took off his clothes, but he didn't bring any extra with him so I'm here to borrow some from dad. Mom, is dad here with you?" He then spread his hands: "That was exactly what I said."

Fengjiu fell straight through the door.

It had been more than two centuries since Fengjiu took over sovereignty from her aunt Bai Qian. Her father Bai Yi worried each day over her matrimony. He worried that with Fengjiu's age, it would be hard for her to reign the world. Thus he was adamant in finding for her a capable groom who would be able to assist her.

Bai Yi had never liked Jiuchongtian much. But because his daughter already had an invincible record in Qingqiu, as a last resort, he was forced to shift his searching eyes and look for an exemplary son-in-law from the skies above. When Bai Qian was married away, he ordered Fengjiu to accompany her to Heaven for one full month. On the outside, it appeared that the bride's family was looking out for their daughter. On the other side, he asked Bai Qian to help take care of her niece's lucky star. That way, he thought, Fengjiu could meet a few talents and pave the way for her love fate.

Fengjiu had been staying on Heaven for nearly a month, yet her lucky star remained as dim as it had been. Her babysitting skill on the other hand progressed at a rapid speed. There were only three more days until she would go back to Qingqiu. Thinking she should not waste time, she took the dough out for a stroll on the pleasant 33rd sky.

Next to the sumo bushes behind the entrance gathered a circle of gambling immortals. For the past few days, ever since the little dough's shouting after the Moonlight Garden banquet, Fengjiu had been refraining from coming near crowds in order to avoid more scandals. But unable to keep her curiosity at bay, she nudged the dough to check it out in secret disguise. She herself hid under the cool shades of an agarwood tree.

The tree under which she was enjoying the cool air was a king agarwood which had been around since the beginning of time. It was especially sturdy and verdant.

As luck would have it, this was a daily resting spot of Donghua Dijun's.

And as luck would have it, Donghua was sitting hidden in the canopy above to ponder over a Buddhist sutra.

And as luck would further have it, a gentle breeze swept by, bringing with it the strong fragrance of the agarwood. Fengjiu sneezed. Turning a page, Donghua pushed his book aside and lowered his eyes to gaze down where they fell on her body. She wasn't at all aware of his presence and continued to sit quietly waiting for the dough to return.

After figuring out the situation, the dough flew back to her like a whirlwind. Jutting his elbows out from his small chubby waist, he took two deep breaths and quickly said, "That was a betting site. They're having a long-term bet on whether brother Donghua, erm, uncle, erm, grandpa..." stringing together every address, "whether he will marry you or Princess Zhi'he to be his Queen."

Fengjiu held onto an agarwood bough with one hand, her other hand wiping cold sweat on her forehead. Masking her anxiety, she asked with calm, "You're still so young, what would you know about betting?"

"You're right, I don't," the dough answered ruefully. "But I like learning so I asked one of the fairy brothers. He didn't tell me much; he only said Princess Zhi'he already has 25 bets, totally crushing you who only have 3 bets, and that perhaps he has picked the wrong person." Then with continued ruefulness he added, "I still don't really get it but I didn't want you to wait for long so I quietly slipped away. When I left, he had been asking another brother if he could move his three bets over to Princess Zhi'he or not."

Fengjiu stayed in silent thought for a length of time and at last took a gold pouch from her sleeve; from it were a handful of gleaming rubies. She next removed a delicately carved emerald pendant from her neck and a jade phoenix from her belt. Giving everything to the dough, she told him with utmost seriousness, "Go buy 200 bets." She paused and added, "My name."

The dough took the jewelries and after studying them, said with suspicion, "I'm still so young yet you're teaching me to cheat?"

"If you're from Qingqiu, you must always rank first," she replied with a glance. "Your cousin can't stand to rank behind someone else. This is called the aura of a sovereign. If you don't believe me, take some time to think over my words yourself."

Without missing a beat, the dough retorted, "I heard little uncle said you never ranked first in school. You've always been behind everyone. Sometimes you're even dead last."

Fengjiu coughed in fits. "This is called prioritizing. There are things we must do, and then there are things we mustn't do. Aren't your studies the same way?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I've never ranked last in examinations," the dough pursed his lips.

Now recalling the horrible memories, Fengjiu shuddered. "That's because you never had to learn Buddhist doctrines so you don't know how difficult it is."

"Is it that hard?" The dough shuddered anxiously. Then, perhaps not wanting to face the harsh truth, he added, "But I always see brother Donghua, erm, uncle, erm, grandpa, holding a Buddhist sutra while he goes fishing. It seems as easy as pie."

Fengjiu was silent. At length she sincerely praised, "...what a real weirdo..."

The moment her words landed on the ground, a cool breeze brought with it another strong wave of agarwood fragrance. It drew from her a sneeze. She covered her nose and ran for a few steps, then turned around and told the dough, "I can't stand this scent. I'll wait for you at the small flower garden."

On the top canopy, Lord Liansong who brought the Cang'he sword to Donghua because he had nothing else to do finally got to hear Fengjiu tossed out a heartfelt comment. When the cousins had left to the far distance, he fanned his fan and probed Donghua: "What did you do to make her compliment you that way?"

Donghua closed his Buddhist scripture and said blank-faced, "Compliment? Is that how Cheng'yu compliments you?"

Scratching his nose, Liansong replied, "Oh, she always praised me for being a cad."

Fengjiu knew it was going to be a bad day the moment she stepped out the doors.

Jiuchongtian was supposed to be an auspicious place, but as soon as she stepped out of Qing'yun Palace, there were two magpies circling above her head. They even let fall two fresh dollops of excrement. Of course these minor nuisances didn't affect her interest in sightseeing, but right afterward she had to witness the pack of fairies using her and Zhi'he as their gambling pastime. She was losing badly on top of that! That didn't affect her mood for sightseeing either. But in an attempt to find a peaceful

resting spot, she somehow also came to an agarwood forest. Her allergic itchy nose was now sneezing nonstop.

This series of signs proved that today wasn't a good day for traveling. But the springtime scenery was so pretty, it'd be such a waste to go back. She finally found her way to a safe and quiet place within the small flower garden. But still wanting to test her luck, she waited for the little dough to come back with her winning bets. She thought was about time her misfortunes ended. Once more, she gathered her spirit to go on her stroll. Just then, gentle voices reached her ears through the plants ahead.

Flying into her ears with the wind was a faintly discernible conversation. Lord Buddha, it seemed her crappy luck was going to continue indefinitely.

Days ago she had given herself a set of rules to follow. From here on out she must carefully avoid Donghua at all costs. She had been vigilant thus far; yet some sort of damning fate had brought them together again even in this small garden.

She told the dough, "When Dijun asks, tell him you're here alone to catch butterflies, okay?" Then she turned into a snow-white silk handkerchief and lay still on the Nanyang marble table.

From behind the Sal trees indeed emerged two people, Donghua and Liansong.

Fengjiu could still hear despite her altered form. She heard their footsteps coming closer. The two were in idle chats.

Liansong quipped, "I heard you accepted Yan Chiwu's duel invitation and will be heading to Mount Fuyu tomorrow? Zhonglin also brought to me the Cang'he sword to polish. But why is it that I can't see from you, the appearance of someone who is going off to war?"

Donghua casually replied, "Because my heart is at peace."

Liansong let go of conversations he couldn't win and changed topics instead. "Say, what exactly were you thinking when you made the

Cang'he sword? There is a crystal block the size of the palm, and you carved onto it 10,000 facets with 5000 holes of the exact size. Do you know how much effort I spent to maintain it? Is there some sort of hidden machinery?"

Donghua dug into his memories... "There's no hidden machinery. I was merely bored."

Liansong was silent for a second. Then he laughed and told Donghua, "Even with that evil appearance, the entire world for some reason still praise you without fail. They all think you're virtuous and upright. Not one soul has come to unmask you. Zhonglin couldn't have had an easy time." He paused then continued, "At the mention of whom, I wonder how he managed to put up with it until now."

Donghua mused, "When you say it like this..."

"What?"

"I agree he didn't have it easy."

"..."

Fengjiu lay flat and straight on the table. Hearing their footsteps nearing, her heart went into doubt. Why exactly did she turn into a handkerchief and lie here? How would she hide from them now? Such a white handkerchief lying on such a white marble table, she'd catch someone's attention for sure.

The dough bowed to his elders and cleverly called Dijun 'grandpa' followed by '3rd grandpa' to Liansong. Liansong hadn't seen his grandnephew in a while so he stroked his hair and asked after his studies. The dough answered each question steadily. By the time he lifted his head, he saw Fengjiu the handkerchief in Donghua's hand, with the latter studying her in scrutiny.

Liansong also turned his head and asked, "This is..."

Donghua said deadpan, "I lost a handkerchief. I've been looking for it the past few days."

The dough widened his eyes in disbelief. He wanted to refute but he closed his mouth as he remembered Fengjiu's words. When he saw Donghua folding his cousin Fengjiu up, his small face crumbled in pain as he brokenly said, "Be... be gentle please. Feng... I mean, the handkerchief might get hurt..."

Liansong doubtingly pointed his fan at Donghua's hand and said, "But isn't this style what the ladies use... why are you...?"

Donghua with utter serenity folded the handkerchief into his sleeve. "I heard I was a weirdo. What's so strange about a weirdo using a lady's handkerchief?"

The cloth shook fiercely within his sleeve. Surprised, Liansong walked over to take a look and came back to his seat. "Nothing, haha, nothing strange at all."

Fengjiu felt absolutely frustrated being stuffed inside Donghua's sleeve.

If she could turn back time, she would've thought more carefully and turn herself into a tree. Even if Donghua could see through her magic, he wouldn't be able to uproot her and bring her home. Things had gotten this far. Unless she didn't mind losing Qingqiu's face in front of him and turn back into her queenly self, it would be hard to escape from him. Unfortunately, he had realized who she was and was purposely making things difficult for her. If she was an ordinary person, she wouldn't mind losing her face over something like this. She was used to it anyway. But she was presently the queen of Qingqiu. If such dishonor were to reach her father's ears, she'd get a good beating. She couldn't, under any circumstances, admit that she was Fengjiu of Qingqiu. This handkerchief wasn't worth much. He might just lose interest soon and throw her away.

She started to relax.

Blinking her eyes, she saw that she had arrived at Donghua's Palace. In what was likely the back courtyard, the wall was covered underneath sprawling Bodhi tendrils and branches. Glossy dark green leaves hung like a screen while willowy jade vines swayed slightly. At this time, by the arching doorway appeared a figure dressed in white. In fact, it was High Deity Zheyang from the Ten-mile Peach Orchard who never showed much interest in worldly affairs. On his back was the dough.

Fengjiu turned to look in surprise, and immediately formed a newfound admiration for the dough. How smart he was to have invited Zheyang instead of his mother. She was going to throw away their family ties but now she was completely touched.

Zheyang exchanged pleasantries for a while, threw out a few compliments for Donghua's garden, and showed admiration for Donghua's incense burner workmanship before being tugged fiercely by a tiptoeing dough. He slowly moved topics to the subject matter of rescuing Fengjiu and started to say, "Truth be told, I've come to disturb you today because of a trivial matter."

He brought the dough out from behind and continued, "While I was taking a nap, this little monkey took the handkerchief I especially brought for his mother out to play. He came back with a sad face. And after asking, I understand that he had not lost it, but it was rather picked up by you."

He paused and feigned a sigh. "It wouldn't be such a big deal if it was just an ordinary handkerchief. However, this one was especially embroidered by the kid's grandmother for his mother. I was entrusted to bring it here on my trip to Heaven. Because it has sentimental value, I can't help but come to ask for it."

Fengjiu was originally worried that Zheyang wouldn't match up as Donghua's opponent. If he had opened his mouth and asked, "Have you seen an embroidered handkerchief?" Donghua would blatantly say, "No, not at all." But Zheyang's words had clearly blocked Donghua's track. Zheyang had commanded all of Fengjiu's respect at this point.

She happily lay inside Donghua's sleeve and waited for him to hand her over to Zheyang. His long slender fingers indeed reached inside his sleeve, but she had underestimated Donghua's level of shamelessness. Passing by her, his finger produced an exact replica that was also neatly folded. He handed it over to Zheyang. "I picked up this one just now on the 33rd Heaven. Is it yours?" he said as he spooned more incense into the burner. He added, "If it's not, you should visit Lord Liansong's Yuanji Palace. Perhaps he picked it up."

Zheyang looked at the handkerchief which was clearly not the right one. He couldn't say yes but neither could he say no. He couldn't believe he didn't win this battle after millennia of being a god. At this exact time, the dough sneezed. Zheyang conveniently grabbed the handkerchief with great sentimental value and wiped the kid's runny nose. "It's only a handkerchief. Why would I worry that you'll lie to me and steal it," he smiled reluctantly. "You would never do something so contemptible. Of course this one is good."

He said a few more things and took the dough away.

Fengjiu stared at the vanishing backs in disappointment. Because her eyes and ears were comparable to Qianli Yan and Shunfeng Er¹⁸, she could still hear the dough crossly say, "I can't believe you failed. You didn't do your best to save cousin Fengjiu. I don't know you anymore."

Zheyang jokingly replied, "It's not as if he kidnapped your little uncle, why should I make enemies with him? Furthermore, I looked at Fengjiu's fate just last year. It seems her good fortune is rising. She always dies and revives herself. This might be one of those times." Then he mumbled, "But I haven't predicted people's fate in quite a while. I'm not sure how

¹⁸ 順風耳 Shunfeng Er – lit. With-the-wind Ears. An immortal who can hear thousands of miles away.

千里眼 Qianli Yan – lit. Thousand-mile Eyes. An immortal who can see thousands of miles away.

accurate it is.” After a pause, he added, “Right, little Ah Li, I also looked at your fate. Have you fallen into a love snare recently?”

The little dough pondered and asked, “What’s a love snare?”

Fengjiu mentally bit her fingernails and thought to herself it’d be better to believe herself than to believe Zheyang’s divination. No matter if one was a god or a human, one could only depend on oneself in times of trouble.

In the courtyard enveloped by the scent of white sandalwood, Donghua leaned over and brushed the snow-like ashes with a spoke to put out the embers. Then after a few more brushes, he covered the burner and suddenly said, “How long do you intend to pretend?”

Fengjiu flinched. So he already knew. Fortunately she had just thought of a good battle plan, part of which was being taciturn. Thus she stayed quiet and ignored him.

Donghua casually rested his incense spoke down. He brought her out toward the sunlight, and after a long while, unhurriedly said, “So turning into a handkerchief is your hobby?” What a ridiculous conclusion, yet she refused to answer him, still.

Donghua rarely smiled, but there now appeared a quick flash in his eyes. Seeing it, Fengjiu suddenly became nervous. Sure enough she heard him say, “That’s good then. I’m actually in need of a wiping rag for my sword. Thanks ahead for your offer.”

Wipe his sword? Wipe one of the ten best weapons in the world, the same one that cut through steel like it was cutting through mud, that famous Cang’he sword? Fengjiu suddenly felt faint. She was so horrified she lost her one chance at replying him. Without missing a beat, Donghua placed her back into his sleeve once more.

At first, Fengjiu thought he would eventually grow bored and let her go. Waiting was the most pliable solution that would allow her to keep her dignity. She hadn’t expected Donghua would make her into a sword-wiping rag... and he was just the type to do what he says. The world was

peaceful in recent years, there was scarcely any war that she knew of. Even with his professed intention, she wasn't very worried. Then before falling asleep, she suddenly remembered he had accepted the duel invitation from the demon lord Yan Chiwu. The Cang'he sword was bound to be blood-stained again tomorrow. She flew up in shudders and fluttered above the rosewood bed. After deliberating for half an incense time, she decided she must flee tonight.

To avoid stirring Donghua from his sleep, Fengjiu took care not to change back into her human form. But it was nigh impossible to lift the long curtains which draped down to the ground in her current state. As she bent down, she saw Donghua with his silver hair flowing over the jade pillow, a thin quilt draping over his waist. His face remained ever handsome despite how many years it had been. Most importantly, he seemed to be in deep sleep. Besides clearing her five senses, she couldn't conjure up any spells to aid her escape in the shape of a handkerchief. She shouldn't say there wasn't a way. For instance, she could always turn back into her original form and at the same time cast a sleeping spell on Donghua. But to do so without him knowing wasn't exactly easy, and what should she do if she failed?

She thought for a while. Her courage suddenly doubled in the long silent night. Sure, it'd be nice to preserve her grace, but that was as good as lost by now. Even if gossips were to spread, the worst thing that could happen would be getting a good whipping from her father. It wasn't as though she had never been spanked. Who knows, having a taste of her childhood again might not be so bad. She spun around and in a flash shape-shifted back into a maiden in mourning clothes. Her fingertip softly touched Donghua's forehead. He made no movement. She looked at her hand in awe. Had she really succeeded? There was indeed truth in these mortal words: 'Had rather be bold and die from gormandizing than be a coward and perish in starvation'.



The air was still cool in May. Taichen Palace had also always been full of frostiness. Fengjiu lifted the bed curtain, turned to take one last look at a sleeping Donghua, and with kindness tucked his arms back under the cloud quilt. Then with some afterthought, she pulled the cover up from his waist to his neck and carefully tucked it in. By the time she stood up, her long black hair for some reason had tangled with his silvery strands. No matter how hard she tried they refused to come apart. She didn't know how long her spell would last, so she conjured up a pair of scissors and decidedly snipped off her own locks. Then she sprang up quickly without bothering to trim it again. But because she had been a handkerchief for so long, her body couldn't find its balance and fell forward into a crooked screen resulting in a loud crashing sound. Donghua still didn't wake up.

When she got to the doors she suddenly backed two steps in recollection of something. Facing the curtains' direction, she cast several consecutive sleeping spells. She only turned to close the doors once she saw the purple mist spread over the royal blue draperies and that the Jixiang plant at the foot of the bed had shown signs of weariness. She safely shut the doors,

followed the turning corridors, and turned into the small garden where Donghua spent most of his daily time.

Now standing within the garden, Fengjiu lightly flapped her sleeve. Out came a night pearl as large as an orange. With its radiating light, she immediately searched for the Frosty Grass bush.

If not for all the misunderstandings which brought her into Taichen Palace tonight, she would almost have forgotten about her precious Frosty Grass. Its roots were a great antidepressant; its petals were a first grade seasoning. Siming had brought it back for her one year when he went to meet the Buddha in the Far West. He even said this seed from Lingshan was the last in the world. Too bad she had already done a transaction with the Demon Clan at that time. Being Donghua's pet fox, she had nowhere to hide the seed. All she could do was plant it in his garden. But before the Frosty Grass could flower, she had cut off her ties with Donghua and left Jiuchongtian. It was a pity she had forgotten to bring it with her due to her pains. Feeling regrets, she now hastened here to take it back.

After a long search, she at last found it inside a small flowerbed, looking rather unremarkable next to the Twin Lotus¹⁹ branch beside it. She dug it up while taking care not to hurt the root cluster, then carefully wrapped the treasure in her sleeve. She now took a good look around the garden. In those days when she was still a maid, Princess Zhi'he had forbidden her from encroaching the perimeter. Back then she never had a chance to enter this royal garden where Donghua frequented. Then when she became a baby fox, she could follow in with Donghua every single day and bounce around as she wished. Alas, the world which appeared before a fox's eyes was different from the world which was seen through a human's eyes. The world in those days was also different from the world at present.

Fengjiu squinted her eyes and swept across the small garden. It was a unique garden despite its small size. On the other side was a tall waterfall

¹⁹ 并蒂莲 bingdi lian – these are called Twin Lotuses because two blossoms grow out from one stalk. They are often used to symbolize faithful couples.

which separated the two courtyards. On the tiled walls were climbing Bodhi vines. They didn't look any different from other flowers during the day but at night they radiated a weak glow. They were in the shape of a small lantern, and they looked exceptionally beautiful. No wonder they were also called by an appropriately elegant name: Night's Moonlight. In the middle of the garden was a tall maple tree that pierced straight through the clouds. Next to the seating area was a small lotus pond. Hanging above it was a hexagonal gazebo made from white sandalwood boughs. She sighed. It'd been many years, yet this place hadn't changed at all. And unfortunately, memories here were starting to come back in waves.

Fengjiu wasn't typically sentimental. There had been times in the beginning when she had drunk in pining for Donghua, but after she severed her ties with him she hadn't done so anymore. Her memories of Donghua had also faded away significantly. Yet, perhaps because she was now in a place that held deep emotional memories, and the sky above was even dotting a few lonely specks, the scenery inevitably triggered nostalgia from the past. Absorbed in thoughts, Fengjiu stared at the white sandalwood tree and the crystal table set inside the pavilion. She startlingly found that while she struggled to memorize Buddhist scriptures, her memory of a long-gone past was surprisingly clear. So vivid, they seemed as though they were passing right before her eyes.

In those days when Fengjiu followed Donghua around after they left the Wicked Lotus Sphere, there actually wasn't yet a hexagonal pavilion in this garden.

It was the height of summer; her foxy fur had made her feel insanely stifling. She would sit inside a small boat on the lotus pond and attach two lotus leaves on her head to keep cool. Seeing her pitiable state, a few days later Donghua chopped down two white sandalwood trees to erect a pavilion on the water. On the floor, he installed a cool panel of glass to keep her cool. It was amazingly comfortable to lie sprawled on her back, and she had felt Donghua was unbelievably handy. Later on, she found out Donghua had been even handier than that. The incense used in

Taichen Palace was made with his own hands; the tea they drank was also hand-grown; even the cups and wares were hand-crafted; and the wall-screens in the palace were also hand-painted. She quietly weighed everything in her mind. On one hand, she was proud of herself for her excellent perception. On the other hand, she thought if she were to marry him, they would save quite a lot of expenditures. The more she assessed, the happier she became, and the more she liked Donghua.

Her adoration blinded her into thinking Donghua was perfect. Whenever he made something new, she was the first to show her approval and admiration. Eventually as a habit, Donghua brought first to the little fox whatever he made for her opinion. Because time was abundant, everything he made was unsurprisingly impeccable. Sometimes, Fengjiu thought it had always been this way throughout the long years, and Donghua had perhaps been very lonely.

It was an exceptionally ordinary day that day. She was lying stomach up at the pavilion, wondering what she could do to win over Donghua. The more she gazed at the stars, the hungrier she became. The hungrier she became, the sadder she got. The stars above her suddenly vanished. Donghua with a white porcelain plate sat down in front of her. On the plate was a syrupy glob of sweet and sour fish. The aroma wafted in the air.

Donghua put the dish down and cast a glance at her; for some reason there was hesitation in his voice. "I've just made this. Hot off the stove."

She was previously bothered that she and Donghua weren't compatible because she didn't know any of the things he knew. But surprisingly, he was also a great foodie like she herself. Finally she had found a similarity between the two masters. She was so touched she jumped onto his knees. Then she leapt to the crystal table and used her paw to dip into the sauce at first. But remembering she wasn't human anymore, she retracted her foot and shyly licked the fish with her tongue.

She froze the second she tasted the sauce.

Donghua propped his cheek on his hand and attentively looked at her. "How is it?"

She retreated her tongue. With that same position, she wanted to say it was really, extremely, tremendously awful. But she suddenly remembered a story her aunt imparted to her from long ago. It told of a young bride who wasn't good at cooking. Then one day she was in the mood to make dinner. Her groom ate everything on the table and told her it was delicious. When the wife cleaned up, she had a taste and realized her husband had lied to keep her happy. From then on they lived blissfully together, leaving behind a lovely tale for generations to come.

Fengjiu closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. She cleaned the plate in less than half an incense's time. She miserably held onto her tummy and turned around to give Donghua a pleasing bright smile, showing him that it was delicious yet hoping at the same time he would pick up the reluctance in her smile and taste the sauce himself.

Sure enough, Donghua's gestured his finger. She gently pushed the plate toward him. Donghua paused, she continued to push the plate with her stomach. Donghua tapped his finger on her sauce-stained nose and looked at her for half a day. "You... still want more? There's nothing left today. I'll make some for you tomorrow."

She looked at him numbly, blinked, then suddenly tugged his finger to dip into the sauce. He finally understood what she meant. "That's alright. I've already tasted it." He frowned, "It was dreadful." Looking at her, he continued, "But since we are of different species, I thought our tastes would be different so I brought it to you to try." Then he concluded, "I was right. Foxes have such different tastes."

Fengjiu was dumbfounded. She gave out a cry and fell over on the crystal table. Donghua worriedly asked, "Do you want to have it that much?" Then he left and before she knew it, another plate appeared in front of her face. This plate was twice as large as the previous one, on it was two

plump fish lying neatly side-by-side. Fengjiu widened her eyes at the plate, gave a cry, crawled up, gave another cry, and rolled over again.

From then on Donghua considerably brought to her the same plump carp every morning, and the horrid taste was always preserved, as hard as quality control was. Fengjiu thought to herself Donghua was a god with unpredictable emotions. If she didn't eat the fish, he might keep it in his heart and become melancholic over time. But continuing to consume this stuff wasn't a good solution. Donghua had really misunderstood her this time.

Then came one day when Granny Taishan made a visit. Coincidentally she also had a pet snow fox. Fengjiu slyly gave the snow fox half of her fish portion right in front of Donghua. The little snow fox cautiously tasted it then suddenly stretched its neck to cry out. Its paws desperately scratched at its throat. At last it accidentally swallowed the fish and had to strain to vomit everything back out.

Fengjiu sympathetically watched the snow fox dash around the courtyard looking for water to wash down its intestines. She blinked her eyes toward Donghua as if to say, "We foxes have very normal tastes. I swallowed everything each day just for you." Her implication was strong. Adding more tea, Donghua held the teapot looking at her thoughtfully and finally understood. "Huh, so among the foxes, your taste is still unique." Fengjiu raised her paws to her chest, staggered back two steps, and fell to the ground in despair.

Several more days quickly passed by. Fengjiu's red fur started to shed in clumps from Donghua's cooking talent. Waiting for him to realize on his own would be impractical. She needed to find a way to save herself. After much thought, she decided there was no other way besides telling him directly. She had thought beforehand that she could relay her feelings through body language. Today she would gather her courage and decline Donghua's plump carp. When she walked by his study, she overheard Lord Liansong chatting to Donghua, some of it was about her. She didn't mean to eavesdrop, but there were limitations that came with being a fox...

such as not being able to cover her ears. Before she could raise her front limbs to her head, several words have floated into her ears.

First, it was Liansong's voice. "I didn't know you like to keep pets. I noticed you have a fox now?"

Then, it was Donghua's voice. "It's very special. You can say we're bound by fate."

It was now Liansong's voice again. "You're lying to me. It's not as though I haven't seen prettier foxes. Look at the Bai family from Qingqiu, they're all unparalleled in looks. What's so special about your little red fox?"

"It thinks my sweet and sour fish tastes good."

Liansong stammered, "... it is special, indeed."

The conversation stopped here. Outside the doors, Fengjiu sadly looked at the clumps of fur on her paws. It was a bittersweet feeling. Even though things weren't how she had thought they would be, and Donghua was completely unaware of her feelings, it seemed he found her endearing because she had praised him for his cooking. Then if she came in right now to tell him everything was a lie... she shuddered at the thought. Whatever the case may be, this was still a beautiful lie. It was best to let it stay beautiful. Her fur might all shed away but she might as well view it as an early molting season.

Who could have guessed with this much insistence to stay, she still departed Jiuchongtian that night, disheartened.

A cold gust of wind blew by, slightly sobering Fengjiu. Thirty thousand years were but a baby's age in Qingqiu. But Fengjiu had picked up quite a few life lessons during that time. For instance, one should only remember happy things, and let go of the unhappy ones. Honestly speaking, there had been more unhappy times at Taichen Palace than there had been happy ones. Being here had made her reminisce the things she kept inside.

It could be seen that what she remembered were mostly good memories, so she should also cheer up.

She took a few jumps onto the pavilion, wanting to try the crystal chair she had always wanted to sit on. But when she did sit on it, it wasn't as comfortable as she thought it would be. Donghua had often sat here to edit the Buddhist sutras sent to him from the Far West. At such times, she had rested her head on his feet to watch the stars.

The stars on Heaven didn't have the dreaminess of the stars back home. Instead, they hung distantly at the end of the sky like unsold candies at the end of the day. There wasn't a whole lot to see, really. She only wanted to have an excuse to stay by Donghua's side a little longer. She knew well how her uncles had sweet-talked her aunts into marriage. When she could talk, she planned to follow their footsteps and coax Donghua to Qingqiu. At that time, she would tell him, "Look at these cold stars, they're not at all lovable. I'll take you stargazing in Qingqiu one day." In the blink of an eye, a hundred years had passed by. Those clever words she wanted to say were never spoken.

It was now midnight. From an unknown place came an array of celestial sounds. Half the sky was covered in the bright moonlight and all the stars converged at the Milky Way. She leaned on her palm and gazed to the cold moonbeam. She whispered as if to herself: "I'll take you stargazing in Qingqiu one day." She woke from her thoughts. At first she was startled, then she shook her head and started to smile – her words casually dispersed by the night wind beside the azure lily pond. In a blink, they had vanished... as if she was sitting there, and never once said a thing.

The Yanfu branches cast shadows against the arching doorway. On the ground were scattered purple Yanfu petals. Donghua languidly leaned against the moon-shaped door. He wore a sleeping robe of thin white silk. Loosely draped outside was another long coat. He originally followed her to the garden to see how she intended on leaving. At first, he thought she lost her way because she was in a hurry, but it turned out the brat was

actually planning to dig up one of his plants. She was even enjoying the scenery here; her expression was momentarily happy, then momentarily sad, as if something was weighing on her mind.

Donghua gazed up and saw the purple drowsiness diffusing outward from his bedchamber. Covering more than half of Taichen Palace by now, it resembled a stretch of lingering cloud as though it was an auspicious sign. He supposed the brat had used up all of her energy to cast these sleeping spells on him. From the southeast corner, it appeared that even the celestial sounds had also begun to die away in the purple smoke. The person who conjured up the spell seemed to be in complete unawareness. She looked to still be absorbed in thoughts. In a flash, the purple color had gradually spread into the garden. It diffused through the waterfall, reached over the high towering trees, and finally flowed into the sandalwood pavilion. Donghua silently counted to three and, in the moonlight, turned toward the immersed young lady. As predicted, she easily tipped over.

Pushing aside the Yanfu branches, Donghua walked in from behind the arching doorway. Everything was quiet within the courtyard. Even the Bodhi vines' usual dim glow seemed to be much more subdued. Inside the pavilion, the ancient white sandalwood's fragrance had dwelled in one spot, seemingly unable to dissipate. He bent down to see her dozing away on the white crystal table and couldn't help but chuckle. How could she be cast under her own magic without knowing a thing? She was probably the only one in the entire world. Who could blame her father Bai Yi for doing everything he could to find her a capable husband.

He lightly reached out toward her and conjured up a spell from his fingers. In the garden shrouded under a sleepy mist, he turned her into a handkerchief anew and leisurely placed her back within his chest.

Chapter 04

In her drowsy sleep Fengjiu heard gusts of wind screeching by her ears. Thinking it was a dream, she peacefully closed her eyes again to remain asleep. But as soon as her eyelids fell, she jolted wide-awake. The Morning God in his sun chariot was sprinkling morning rays across the sky. He neared and got out of his chariot to bow when he saw Donghua.

Fairy ranges looming behind the clouds were zooming by underneath their soles; a few green summits peeked out to view. Fengjiu froze for a length of time. When she finally gained enough energy to control her trembling, she gazed up and confirmed she was still a silk kerchief. She numbly looked around to see why she was hearing so clearly the whistling of wind. It turned out she was tied to Donghua's sword hilt and worn at his waist. They were gliding together on wind and clouds.

Befuddled, she tried to recall last night. Surely she had escaped, so why was she still here? Was she caught afterward? But she didn't remember anything about that. Perhaps she didn't escape after all. Perhaps after Donghua changed into his sleepwear, he kept her in his sleeve again and she also fell asleep with him, and everything was but a dream. She tried to steady herself and grew to find her explanation becoming increasingly reasonable. It was a good dream, she thought, if somewhat tearful...

Only when Mount Fuyu appeared before her eyes and the melancholic wind whistled past her ears did she belatedly realize Donghua was having a duel with Yan Chiwu today, and she just happened to have been unluckily brought along to the South land.

The feud between Donghua and Yan Chiwu dated back to 300 years ago. According to legends, it started because of a woman.

Of course this legend wasn't widely circulated, and everyone who knew the real story still felt that Donghua was innocent.

That year when the Red Demon Lord Xuyang intended to marry off his younger sister Princess Jiheng to the Deity clan, he looked left and right

and finally chose Donghua Dijun of Taichen Palace. What he didn't know was that his sworn brother the Blue Demon Lord Yan Chiwu was already in love with the same renowned beauty of the Demon Realm. However, Jiheng was a romantic. She had always preferred the poignant poetry and sorrowful music of refined gentlemen. Unfortunately for Yan Chiwu, despite possessing the most refined names in the entire South land, he was in reality a boorish brute. Princess Jiheng didn't care for him at all. She had instead liked her brother's fine pick much better. There were times when she even praised Donghua in front of Yan Chiwu.

Her praises only served to fan Yan Chiwu's brewing jealousy. Without anywhere to vent his frustration, he sent a duel invitation straight to Taichen Palace. Donghua at the time had been in seclusion for many years, but since his opponent sent an invitation right to his doorstep, he had no reason to refuse.

After an earth-shattering battle on Mount Fuyu, Yan Chiwu at last resorted to trickery. He used the Soul Locking Jade to trap an unsuspecting Donghua into the Wicked Lotus Sphere – and this was how Fengjiu got her chance to keep him company for three months.

At the time, Fengjiu was grateful to Yan Chiwu for stirring up trouble and ruining Donghua's union with the Demon clan. Donghua also hadn't seemed to keep his engagement close at heart and she eventually let go of her worries.

She hadn't imagined that in three months' time there would be a night when blooming flowers and high-lit lanterns would decorate the grounds at Taichen Palace. Under the warm afternoon sun, a palanquin carried into the main palace a most important guest. This most important guest was no other than the calamitous beauty²⁰ Jiheng. On the white jade bridge, the maiden within lifted the curtains and descended from her palanquin, her

²⁰ 红颜祸水 hongyan huoshui – 'a beautiful face brings floods.' It is used to mean that beautiful women are the cause of calamities.

elegant fingers resting on the phoenix railings. Her lips tinted, her teeth white, her eyes gleaming brightly. Mist drifted slowly on the lake surface; on the rippling viridescent water was a reflection of her high coiffed hair. Just like that, with graceful ease, she had created a scene so charming and ethereal.

Even Fengjiu who was leaning against Donghua's foot felt lightheaded from the sight.

She was the last person in Taichen Palace to know what was happening that day on the white jade bridge. Furthermore, it was Zhi'he who brought to her this knowledge. It turned out Donghua had agreed to this marriage, and he even seemed to welcome the idea. Those few simple words drilled into her belated ears like a lightning bolt coming out of the blue. In an instant she felt her world had come crashing down.

As for the wedding night, when the scarlet bridal veil was lifted, the bride had somehow changed into Zhi'he. Fengjiu's mind was in a jumbled knot during the last few days before she left. She only knew Zhi'he had told her that such things were common in the mortal realm. Young couples were too stubborn and proud to understand one another. Matrimony was but a gold-testing stone for true love. It had also been the case for her and Donghua.

Fengjiu was so inexperienced that she had believed even such nonsense. She was hurt by her own naiveté. The only thing she was quite sure of was that Donghua wasn't exactly 'young' anymore, so the test for young lovebirds couldn't have been applied to him.

In hindsight, she realized everything could've been made up by Zhi'he. Otherwise, Tianjun wouldn't have gotten so angry and banished her to the mortal realm. After going through so much in life, she wasn't ignorant anymore. Following careful thoughts, she knew the chances of Donghua liking Zhi'he were very small. If he had liked his pompous foster sister after all, then he wasn't worth her loving him for so long.

In the end, she could only guess what had really happened, but she wasn't able to verify much of it. She only felt that when Donghua agreed to marry Jiheng, it could've been out of genuine admiration. Truthfully speaking, even under her scrutinizing eyes, Princess Jiheng was exceptionally kind and brave. Without mentioning her beauty, her talents, or even her virtues, just the fact that she had selflessly helped them in the Wicked Lotus Sphere was plenty admirable. It was only a matter of course that Donghua would come to like her. Fengjiu, too, had certainly lent Donghua a hand in the Wicked Lotus Sphere. But even the most ridiculous collection of her aunt's screenplays did not contain the following words: "A gentleman was saved by a young lady and a beloved pet. The gentleman chose the pet over the young lady." For this reason, she accepted her defeat to Jiheng with acquiescence.

Cold wind screeched on the summit of Mount Fuyu. In the blink of an eye, billowing clouds came rolling in. The vast land was as desolate as a battlefield. Fengjiu returned from her reverie. She was glum, but quickly cheered up upon seeing her surroundings.

She was born in an age of peace, having never once witnessed any of the famous battles recorded in history books. A rare chance came up two hundred years ago when her uncle-in-law, Yehua, was battling against the Ghoulish King Qingcang. It was said to have been quite a scene, but unluckily, she was stuck in the mortal realm at the time repaying a debt. For two hundred years she prayed to Heaven on each birthday for some immortals to have a dispute which would blow up into a fight. But Heaven paid no heed to her request; he let their relationships improve each year instead. She had little hope that her dream would ever come true, but unexpectedly she hit the jackpot today and finally got to see one in person. Her heart sang happily.

Whatever the case, this demon lord was able to trick Donghua in the past. Although his method was a bit unscrupulous, he did have talents, and he must be a worthy rival. Rumors had it he was forthright and free-spirited. So free-spirited that two slams of his sledgehammer and a stamp of his feet

would shake the mountains, a holler of his voice would move the wind and clouds. In Fengjiu's imagination, this Yan Chiwu should at least be that capable. She imagined and was fooled by her own imagination. With bated breath she waited for Donghua to fan away the heavy fog so that she could finally see this free-spirited warrior.

Mount Fuyu was situated on the borderline between the South land which was under the jurisdiction of the Demon clan and the West land which was ruled by the white fox family. It stood hidden within the clouds, and was a famous mountain known to both fairies and demons.

Once the thick clouds dissipated, on Mount Fuyu stood not a man who carried a sledgehammer. Instead there was a very young and delicate youth outfitted in black. He impatiently bit on melon seeds while squatting on the mountaintop; husks were scattered all over the ground. Fengjiu looked around. Perhaps clan lords were allowed to be a few hours late? Suddenly the melon-seed-biting youth leapt onto a cloud and flew straight at them; his figure elegant, his lips rosy, and his teeth white. Which fairyland did this handsome man come from... she couldn't help but gape at him.

The handsome youth stood on a cloud some meters away from them. He drew a long sword, and with murderous intent, pointed it at Donghua and shouted, "Damn you, Ice Face. Your gramps has been waiting for half a day. What I hate the most are dawdling people. Don't be so afraid! Hurry and draw your weapon. Let's get this over with. Unless I give you a good pounding today I won't be able to erase the humiliation in the past. I'll have your name rewritten backward this time!!!"

Shock... is what Fengjiu felt.

She dumbfoundedly stared at the handsome young man who constantly called himself 'gramps'. Gulping, she understood from his words that he was Yan Chiwu, one of the seven lords of the Demon Clan. Yet it was still quite perplexing. She had heard all kinds of tales about him, and in a nutshell, they all agreed Yan Chiwu was an oaf in both tastes and manners. For that reason Princess Jiheng was unwilling to marry him. Could it be

that even boorish men from the Demon Realm were all pretty boys like this? She couldn't help herself from imagining a little. What would the rumored gentlemen look like, then? When she called up an image of a hairy warrior facing the sunset and reciting sad poetry, her stomach suddenly churned.

Everything was within Donghua's estimation. After letting Yan Chiwu howl to his heart's content, he politely gestured his hand: "After you." His nonchalance angered Yan Chiwu. He gave a glare which revealed his thuggish nature: "After your grandmother." Strong winds picked up, ominous currents whirled behind him; on the boundless inky river was a weapon-wielding army.

Having never seen such scene in her life, Fengjiu started to feel queasy. Donghua, on the other hand, was far too calm. He even lifted his hand to smooth down the handkerchief that was her, which was being blown by the gust, so that she could hang securely on his sword hilt.

Yan Chiwu scoffed. His face was as exquisite as a spring blossom under the moonlight. "Since I dared asked you out to fight, I came prepared," he said icily. Surprisingly enough, Fengjiu started to daydream at this moment. She surmised there must have been another reason why Jiheng didn't like this Yan fellow. Perhaps she didn't want to have a husband who was prettier than herself to prevent losing face when they stood together. Looking up, she saw Yan Chiwu raise his hand and point to the army below them. His face glowed even more exquisitely with the aid of an ecstatic smile. Fengjiu nodded quietly in her mind. Right, that had to be why Jiheng didn't choose him.

"Take a look. This demonic formation was something I recently developed. It is formed from 7000 mortal spirits... took quite a bit of effort from me. They're all vice spirits, but if you destroy them, you would be destroying their chances at penance and rebirth. I, too, want to see how you benevolent gods plan to break this formation of mine." In a flash, the mortal spirits had formed into an armored legion. They brought with them howling winds and wailing rain.

Every single one of them was still in his human form, but their greedy eyes were as malicious as those of wolves. The weapons in their arms emitted a deadly chill. On the endless water, waves stretched out to the horizon. The unending horde of 7000 spirits came upon them, rows after rows. It was a horrifying scene. Fengjiu trembled and pressed closer to Donghua's waist. She had always been afraid of overcrowded spaces. Right now she could only feel goosebumps upon witnessing this scene. She could care less about the new learning experience, she only wanted to free herself from Donghua.

Before she could come up with any idea, the Cang'he sword had flown out of its sheath and fallen into Donghua's hand. His eyes gave a sweep at the spirits on Mount Fuyu and before long, a radiant light spread out within a 100-mile radius. Images of countless blades appeared, swallowing up the dark energy. Trapped within the bright sea of blades, all Fengjiu felt were the blinding white light and her intense headache. She couldn't see what the swords were doing, she only felt as though she was also flying around frenziedly. By her ears were the terrible wailings intermixed with the growling wind and raging clouds. When she recovered, she was already back in Donghua's hand. Blood had dyed the water into a strange color. At times a sanguine fog rose to the banks, but as though it was a sea of deadly poison, wherever it went, trees and plants vanished into green smoke. By and by, Donghua's unfeeling voice broke through the air: "It's broken!"

Fengjiu's head pounded. Broken? What was broken?

Ah, Yan Chiwu's painstakingly created formation.

Her eyes had only adjusted to the light when Yan Chiwu's fury took over: "I'll certainly be punished for using these 7000 spirits in making this formation. Perhaps a thunderbolt is waiting for me. But as a god, shouldn't you do everything in your power to give them a chance? Since your sword is now stained with their blood, you've lifted onto your shoulders an immense sin. What's more, you acted without a hint of hesitation. Aren't you afraid there would be one day when the heavens apprehend you for your misdeed?"

Tiredly, Fengjiu chanted her Buddhist verses. She prayed to the heavens that Yan Chiwu would be precise in his swings. Yet although the Yan fellow was utterly precise with his sword, the force given off by the blade could still very well harm her. Momentarily pessimistic, Fengjiu couldn't believe Donghua had done something so dishonorable. How could he punish her this way, for what was only a careless joke about his perverseness? Never mind that. If he brought her death today, let's see how he would answer to Qingqiu. Let's see how her grandfather, her grandmother, her father, her mother, her older uncle, her aunt-in-law, her aunt, her uncle-in-law, her younger uncle, and her younger uncle-in-law would seek justice.

While caught in her excitement, a silver light flashed at the end of the sky, cutting through dark billowing clouds. Yan Chiwu grunted painfully and stumbled ten meters backward. In the distant battlefield, Donghua's casual voice rang: "The sin of killing, you say?" Although it was calm, his voice carried a powerful undercurrent. "I haven't paid attention to war and peace these past millennia. But have you forgotten how I ruled the six realms during my reign?"

Hails blew at Fengjiu, giving her another wave of migraines. Donghua of yore? Ah! Donghua of yore.

No one was more knowledgeable than Fengjiu regarding this topic. She couldn't remember a thing about Qingqiu's history nor her maternal family tree, but she could recite three days' worth of Donghua's past. Thanks to Donghua's good grace, she was able to rank first in every history class. Now that she was no longer related to Donghua, she allowed some of it to come back into her hazy mind. How funny it was that she could still remember each detail so vividly.

Legends told of Pangu who, with a swing of his ax, created Heaven and Earth. The lighter entity floated up and became the sky, the denser one sank downward and became earth. The world was no longer a single mass thereafter. Finally there was Yin and Yang, and out of it were born the gods and demons who fought over the lands and seas for a place to reign. In

ancient times the world wasn't as prosperous and there weren't as many rules and regulations. What were there, were chaos and bloodshed.

In those early days, the Human clan and a part of the Goblin clan hadn't yet been banished to the Lower Realm. But because they were born so little and meek, they had to lean on the two bigger Heaven and Demon clans and go through wretched days of dependency.

Hundreds of million years passed by in a blink. Rarely was the world at peace. At times the Demon clan reigned all, at times the Gods; occasionally the Ghouls luckily took over; yet each era was short-lived.

Everyone yearned for a hero to arrive and unite the six realms, ending the ceaseless chaos. Most importantly, each had hoped he would be born from his own clan.

In several short years, the six clans of Fairy, Ghoul, Deity, Demon, Human, and Goblin propagated exponentially. The territorial wars between the clans increasingly intensified. But Heaven was Heaven for its unpredictable ways. Amid the desperate search for a new hero, with neither a mother nor father, he sprang forth from the holy Blue Sea at the very end of the skies, a true child of Heaven.

Born in the East land where good light shone, he simple took two characters and went by the name Donghua (Brilliance in the East). He was Donghua Dijun.

Although Donghua was destined to become a hero in that era and a legend for future ones, unlike Crown Prince Yehua of Jiuchongtian, Donghua's birth was extremely quiet. There was no omens such as a golden nimbus spreading in the skies, or 49 five-colored birds²¹ circling the Blue Sea. It was so quiet, in fact, that no one knew now how he came into existence.

Only a condensed version survived in a few chronicles. They said the King drank pure water from the source and absorbed natural essences to become an immortal life. But how did Heaven give birth to him? Did he tumble out from a stone, or did a woodcutter find him squatting inside a bamboo and bring him home to raise? The records in the annals were brief, and not much else was documented.

Despite having to shoulder onerous responsibilities since an early age, Donghua's childhood was utterly ordinary. He grew up alone at the Blue Sea. Without the protection of the Deity clan, he was routinely harassed by the demons and ghouls from neighboring areas. In ancient times, one didn't learn from teachers. Everything Donghua knew was acquired through his fists, his lifelong legend built upon one bloodshed after another.

His road to success was entirely different from that of Moyuan, the God of Music and War of many millennia before, or that of Lord Yehua in recent years. These two, one was raised by Fushen, the other was taught by Lingbao Tianzun of Shangqing²² and the benevolent Bodhisattva of the Western Heavens. Such were the traditional upbringings of noble families.

²¹ 五彩 wucai means 'of five colors'. Although it can sometimes be translated as multicolor, the number five is important in this context. Five is believed to be the number of primary colors in Chinese culture (thanks Kalridge!) and there were only three ancient birds, according to 山海經 *Shanhaijing*, with all five colors present on their plumage: the 皇 Huang, the 鳳 Feng, and the 鸞 Luan. Obviously there are other multicolor birds such as the peacocks, so I have to distinguish the two by sticking to the literal translation.

²² 靈寶天尊 Lingbao Tianzun – the 2nd Pure One of the Daoist Trinity, ruling over the Heaven of Supreme Purity known as 上清 Shangqing.

Ever since she was young, Fengjiu had always been an avid fan of Donghua. At the outset, it was because he had saved her life, but on a deeper level it was due to a reverential admiration. To have single-handedly settled the world's chaos by himself with no one's help was, in her mind, an incredible feat.

It wasn't an easy job - reigning over the world with powers to punish and kill. Pandemonium was sure to stir if even a slight trace of kindness existed. Only cold-blooded dispassion could tame turmoil and bring permanent peace. Even after the Heaven clan had grown more powerful each year, and Donghua had passed his reign onto Tianjun and retired to the 13th celestial heaven to enjoy his peace in Taichen Palace, he left behind so bloody a legend it still struck terror in people's mind. Thus this time when Yan Chiwu thought he could use 7000 spirits to control Donghua, one could hardly blame the king when he asked coolly whether Yan had forgotten about his past reign. Donghua wasn't a compassionate holy being; this fact had never changed.

In the end, it was debatable, still, whether Donghua was a Holy being or not.

Fengjiu had long idolized Donghua since she was a child. To know more about him, she collected every document from Heaven to Hell which chronicled his past. Most of these historical records talked of Donghua's accomplishments; they were all honey to the ears. There was one sole raggedy book of unknown origins that was different. In it, Donghua had once been appraised by Fushen, and the latter concluded that the former's mind had reached the single-minded state within the nine mental abidings. Either he could only dwell on goodness, or he could only dwell on evil.

Fengjiu's studies of philosophy weren't exceptional; thus she transcribed these words and went to ask her little uncle Bai Zhen. Bai Zhen wasn't quite a trustworthy source but he had lived over 100,000 years. His understanding of philosophy was at least decent, and he explained to her like so: "The so-called nine mental abidings were nothing more than the

nine stages of samatha, namely inward abiding, continuous abiding, calm abiding, near abiding, harmonized abiding, stillness, supreme stillness, single-mindedness, and mental equanimity. If a person has reached the single-minded stage, it meant his heart has reached ultimate peace and no turmoil may reach him. Once his mind is at peace, it makes no difference whether he is good or evil. At the next equanimity stage, he would have transcended into an entirely different existence. There has only been the Buddha of the Western Heavens who has attained this level of enlightenment. To understand existence is to become the Buddha. To become the Buddha is to exist.”

Fengjiu patiently listened, and gained more headaches from the various ‘abidings’ in her uncle’s explanation. Anything that had to do with philosophy was indeed mystifying. But because she wanted to understand Donghua better, she returned home and secretly pondered over the subject. She finally comprehended that Donghua had started out as neither a god nor a demon, but afterward he had chosen the ways of the gods and left the ways of the demons. But she couldn’t figure out why he chose the gods over the demons. In her young mind, besides their ancestries, there was no difference between the Deity clan and the Demon clan. Moreover, there were so many beautiful women in the Demon clan.

Besides her grandparents, only Zheyang who resided at the Ten-mile Peach Orchard was closest in age to Donghua among the people she knew. With the excuse of coming across a difficult topic at school, she packed her things and flew to the peach orchard for help. She even took along her Uncle Bai Zhen’s new hand-made jade hairpin as a token.

It was a fabulous gift. Zheyang was rendered happy instantaneously.

Peach blossoms went on for miles in April. Zheyang caressed the jade hairpin and pleasantly repeated her question, “Why did Donghua choose the Deity clan?”

As if he had memorized the passages, he went on to recite: “According to the historians, calamities fell upon the lands that year. Only the Deity clan’s territories were gifted with benign wind and rain; its people lived in

prosperous peace. Upon seeking for the cause, Donghua found out it was because the Deity clan had practiced all five commandments: no killing, no stealing, no lusting, no lying, and no drinking. Because of such praiseworthy morals, Heaven was touched and watched over the Deity clan. That was why Donghua decided to choose the deities over the demons and determined to devote his life from then on to saving others.”

As Fengjiu's awe of Donghua was increasing, Zheyang grinned and added, “Write your answer exactly like so, and you'll receive a high mark, I'm sure.”

“Are you saying there's more to it?” Fengjiu paused to ask amid taking notes.

There was always more to it. And these hidden tales were so far from what was written.

When they spoke of these hidden tales, Fengjiu had thought Zheyang was much more animated, entirely opposite from the bored face he wore in the last lecture.

The hidden tales were as follows.

It was said Donghua, since his birth from the Blue Sea, had gained excellent fighting skills through scuffles and skirmishes. However, he was apparently not interested in the unification of the world. The clans elsewhere beyond the Blue Sea were ceaselessly waging war with one another. A few minions who didn't have a chance to join the battles did not stay put and instead went to look for trouble by picking fights with Donghua. He naturally took care of each of them. But there had been protectors above these minions; the bigger demons protecting these minions felt as though they had been humiliated, thus they took turn in showing up. Above the minions were the cronies, above the cronies were the bosses. He kept taking care of them like this until one day, when he turned around to look, the biggest bosses had become his underlings.

Zheyang held a wine cup as he mischievously smiled: "Don't judge Donghua by the cold masks he puts on. In reality he's the object of many a woman's admiration."

Donghua, with his handsome countenance, youthfulness, and legendary achievements, was unsurprisingly the ideal husband to many ladies from the various clans. There was a young lady from a demonic family who was quite famous at the time, being crowned as the land's most sophisticated beauty. She was one of his admirers. This young lady longed for Donghua so fervently that one night she came and hid herself within his residence.

At night when Donghua returned and found a beauty behind his bed curtain, he was slightly shocked.

"Coming back so late at night, you've made me wait quite miserably, Sire~~~"

Donghua bent down and lifted the maiden into his arms. Her breath quickened. "How impatient you are, Sire~~~"

This impatient Donghua carried his beauty to the door, and without a change in his expression, threw her out in one quick toss. He didn't forget to latch his door and blow out the light.

The young miss didn't give up right away. It took quite a few more tosses for her to eventually stop. But she had started a whole new trend. Although getting kicked out by Donghua was a guaranteed thing, word had it that he was at least kind enough to carry the lady from his bed to the door. Many young ladies felt that it was still worth it to be in his arms even for a few brief moments. From then on, the demonic ladies found ways to undo the force field he cast around his house, and raced each other to sneak into his bed.

As time went on, Donghua became lazy and no longer bothered with a force field. He treated the act of throwing out a beauty each night before bed as a type of training, and was able to live in peace for many years.

Then came a night when finally no more female crawled into his bed. This time it was a pair of painted brows and deep autumn eyes, a pretty boy. He brought the lad to the door and promptly flung him out. The young man wailed, "You carried all of them in your arms before throwing them out. Why did you grab me by the neck instead? You're not being fair. Not being fair at all!"

Zheyang unhurriedly poured more wine into his cup. "It was so bad that when Fushen came to the Blue Sea and asked Donghua to come with him, Donghua followed with nary a word. Women from the Deity clan at least had more restraints than those from the Demon clan, but he wasn't ever truly at peace until the day he entered Taichen Palace."

He feigned a sigh. "For a hero to go into hiding like that, no wonder women are called tigresses. This is similar to Moyuan of Kunlun refusing to take female disciples. In the past when your aunt became his student, she had had to dress as a boy. Fortunately your aunt didn't walk on the same path as his previous female students. Otherwise Moyuan wouldn't be so lofty when he sees me now."

After spilling other people's secrets, Zheyang freely reminded her, "Although it's as I told you, don't write such things in your essays at school. Teachers will only want the correct answers. However, correct answers and the truth are never the same."

Fengjiu was happy to hear that Donghua found the women who liked him bothersome. But then she thought about herself and worried that he might not like her either. She held her notebook and worriedly asked Zheyang, "If he doesn't like women, nor does he like men, then does he not like anything?"

Difficult question. Zheyang thought a while and replied, "I'm guessing Donghua might like furry velvety things."

"He likes monkeys?" Fengjiu asked dejectedly. Then with a wounded look, she added, "What evidence do you have?"

Clearing his throat, Zheyang replied, "Are all furry velvety things monkeys? How did that make you think of monkeys? It's not monkeys. I only thought since all three of his riding beasts are furry, he might prefer furry things more."

Fengjiu immediately brightened up. She shape-shifted back to her original form, her fore limb was still grasping onto her notebook. "I'm a furry animal too! Say, do you think he'd like me?" She then realized what she had said and hastily raised her paw to rub her nose. "That is... I was just asking out of curiosity."

Zheyang said with some interest, "He likes slightly mightier ones. His riding animals have always been tigers and lions."

"Look at me. Am I mighty or not?" Fengjiu said as she bared her teeth and emitted a low growl.

She was so naïve then. If everything had stopped at that point this would still be a harmless story.

Before her eyes, Mount Fuyu shook in tremors. Yan Chiwu was covered in a dark glow. He swung the Xuanjie sword in every direction. Donghua stood atop a cloud, his robe fluttering in the wind. From his fingers materialized a large upside-down concave vessel. Fengjiu recognized it as the Tiancang cage. She had heard of this thing before. It was a treasure from Jiuchongtian made from heavenly ice. Taking shelter inside would protect one's safety, and not even a hair follicle would be harmed.

The Tiancang cage floated next to Donghua. Fengjiu held her breath as she watched him brush aside the lock of hair on her shoulder which had been snapped from the razor-sharp wind. Snapped hair? Fengjiu gazed up and down to realize that she had turned back to her human form. Strong gusts picked up; her silk skirt flapped in the wind.

Fengjiu, whose mind worked especially well in these urgent instances, widened her eyes in surprised and said, "You, you, you knew who I am? And you knew how to turn me back into my original form." At this, she

was lifted into the air. Her anger flared: "Then why didn't you uncover me from the start?"

Demonic currents blew by, fueling her heart with more bravado. "In truth, in truth I did turn into a kerchief to avoid embarrassment, but what you did wasn't gentlemanly either. You were clearly poking fun at me. Am I funny to you?"

She knew she wasn't the type of girl he liked, but she was still a girl. She, too, needed to be treasured. Yet he didn't even treat her right. "If you already knew who I am, you didn't have to take me to this dangerous place. You tied me to your sword hilt to watch my terrified state, didn't you? What I said about you wasn't intentional, you know."

The corners of her eyes reddened in fury. Donghua failed to find words and only gazed at her for a long while. At last he said, "I'm sorry." Fengjiu was naturally hotheaded. Once she heard his apology, she cooled down and cleared her throat: "Forget it, this time..." Donghua added in his leisure way, "I've had enough fun."

Fengjiu's forgiving words stayed lodged in her throat. Anger shot to her head, crackling sparks in her eyes. Donghua petted her hair and smilingly said, "Your ears are red from anger." Fengjiu thought she had heard wrong. How could he be joking with her, this perpetually grumpy person? All of a sudden, flaming fireballs burst from behind. Below them was flooding water. Beasts and serpents bellowed in cheers. Before she could collect her senses, her entire body was lifted up by Donghua as he easily pushed her inside the Tiancang cage.

"Wait inside, don't come out."

Fengjiu wanted to know what was going on. She groped along the cage wall when she thought she heard two faint words: "Be good."

Yan Chiwu looked to the Tiancang cage where Fengjiu was and swung the Xuanjie sword straight at Donghua. "Bastard, are you insulting me? Why did you bring your family along to our fight?"

One was a god from Heaven. The other was a lord of the demons. Their moves were faster than any other fight's. The earth altered colors continuously. At times spring rain fell to the ground, at times winter snow covered their sight. The four seasons changed within their sword movements. Sparks came out of their blades like fireworks atop the summit of Mount Fufu.

Perched by the mountain shoulder, Fengjiu leaned against the wall of the Tiancang cage and watched the fight. She suddenly gasped as her tears welled up into a curtain of mist, covering everything behind it. Just a moment ago he was still in losing position, but he somehow turned it around. The long blade glinted; its deceptive angle aimed straight at Donghua's chest.

Fengjiu's eyes flew open. The Xuanjie sword changed from white to red. It's a lie, a lie. Did it really stab him? But yet after two steps, oddly Yan Chiwu was the one to groan in pain. The writhing serpent-like fog rapidly dispelled. Donghua with a palm-strike pushed Yan Chiwu away. Fengjiu ducked in reflex. Suddenly a strong force pulled her from behind. Before she could anchor herself, she was whirled into the spinning cyclone. She heard Donghua shout after her, his husky voice different from the calm tone of normal days. His voice was livid within the howling whirlwind: "Xiao Bai!"

Crouching within the flapping wind, Fengjiu was rendered stupefied for a second. So this was how Donghua called her. To her, there was something special about his way of calling her by this childlike name. In fact, when she was little, she had been extremely envious of her aunt's name, Bai Qian. Two characters, short and sweet. But the fact remained that her name would forever be three characters. She had hoped that they would at least be three catchy words, like her uncle's good friend Su Moye whose name had a lyrical ring to it. If it was just Fengjiu, it could at least be regarded as elegance in commonness or commonness in elegance, like those of the old-mones. But her family name had to be added to the appellation. At Taishang Laojun's place, there was a young maid who was

close to her. This girl was called Wuji Baifeng Pill (Black Chicken White Phoenix Pill). She had thought about her name a lot and it always ended with a sigh. Everyone else in the world didn't dare call her by her full name, thus over time they mistook her name to be Feng Jiu with Feng being her surname. But *he* called her Xiao Bai, and she loved being called this way.

Donghua couldn't reach them. Being injured, Yan Chiwu had called upon a spinning cyclone and somehow Fengjiu was whirled into it. Grabbing onto her shoulder, he roared, "Why didn't you fall into my trap? How can it be that my illusion didn't work on you? Was Ice Face's coughing blood only a deception?"

Then he howled ruefully, "Is my magic useless now? How can I live anymore? I've disgraced my title so. It would be better if this wind took me to the Underworld so I could reincarnate as a turtle. Let's die together!"

Fengjiu started to tremble. She needed to think fast. She really didn't want to go to the Underworld with him and reincarnate into two turtle siblings. She covered her ears and raised her voice: "No, your magic isn't useless. I saw him cough blood."

"Young lady, you should've left the Tiancang cage to shield your lover. Once you came, he would be flustered enough that I could strike him. Such is the Beauty Stratagem in the Thirty Six Stratagems. But see what you did? You came at the wrong time, that's why I got struck."

"I'm sorry my timing was wrong, but you..."

The wind pushed them off their balance.

"I don't think you're well right now... and that Beauty Stratagem in the Thirty Six Stratagems? That was written by Siming who never even won against anyone. His words aren't trustworthy."

Upon her last word, both tumbled down into the deep valley.

After having fallen into the valley for a while, Fengjiu began to realize there was something amiss with what Yan Chiwu said before they fell down here.

Reasonably speaking, she should be on Donghua's side. She didn't run over to shield him because she felt small, frail Yan Chiwu might've killed her but he would have only given Donghua a few scratches at most. Their skills were on different levels, and their abilities to withstand the blade were also different. And yet while these were the things she considered, in reality she had also been gravely worried for Donghua. Despite his pranks, he very honorably let her have the Tiancang cage to protect her safety. Therefore she wasn't being petty, nor was she holding onto any past grudges. But how could Donghua even begin to understand each of her deliberate feelings? He must've begrudged her for lacking righteousness. After collecting her thoughts, Fengjiu turned and said her apologies to Yan Chiwu. She accepted in her mind that Donghua had misunderstood. A moment before he was still shouting after her. A moment later she fell into the valley and his shadow was nowhere to be found. She could hardly blame him. He must really be angry with her this time.

Chapter 05

Fanyin Gu was a famous valley within Mount Fuyu. It was home to the world's rare and precious Biyi bird species²³.

Told through folklores, these Biyi birds had always been of a delicate nature. They became more and more fragile as each generation passed. Even a little soiled air would lead to their ailments. For this reason, many years ago their ancestors through much effort found this valley and led the entire tribe to take refuge here.

To prevent outside pollution from entering and contaminating their cultivation, Fanyin Valley opened up only once each jiazi cycle. It opened only for a short moment with just a crack to allow for heavenly envoys to pass. No one, but the experienced and the skillful, could grab onto that small moment and squeeze through.

Yan Chiwu could've struck sooner, he could've struck later, but he waited until the right moment Fanyin Valley opened up to strike. The wind could've blown east, it could've blown west, but it blew them straight into the crevice between the stone walls. The path was neither wide nor was it narrow; it was just enough for the two of them to pass through. What kind of luck was this exactly...?

As a fellow lost soul in no man's land, Fengjiu looked around for a clean boulder to sit on. She saw Yan Chiwu squatting next to the ivy-covered cliff with his back turned against her. She could sense fury emitting from his back.

When they first fell down, Fengjiu fell on top of Yan Chiwu, and despite the pain, he never uttered a sound. Even though he didn't exactly save her life, he still spared her quite a bit of corporal distress. Yan Chiwu was a

²³ 比翼鳥 Biyiniaoyao – as recorded in 山海經 *Classic of the Mountains and Seas*, it is a bird with red and blue plumage, has only one wing and one eye each, and would therefore need to fly in pairs; also called a 蠻蠻 Man'man or 鵽鵽 Jian'jian.

good person, she thought. Her impression of him became amicable and she didn't want to call him 'the Yan fellow' anymore.

"Xiao Yan," she gently called him.

Xiao Yan turned his head and tore a hole in her face with his glare. "Call me Xiao Yan again and I'll make brine out of your tongue."

This Xiao Yan was stirring something maternal in her. Patiently, she approached him. "Then what would you like me to call you?" she asked.

He thought for a while and replied, "Whatever the mortals call their strongest men, call me the same."

Fengjiu looked at small, frail Yan Chiwu, the way his body tapered from his huddled shoulders toward his slim waist. "Warrior Xiao Yan then?"

Warrior Xiao Yan nodded in satisfaction.

"We're in the middle of nowhere," Fengjiu said, giving their surroundings a sweep, "and you're currently injured as well. Warrior Xiao Yan, why don't we have a chat while you take a rest?"

Liking this new name, his fury dissipated into the far mountains and he replied in a surprisingly gentle voice, "What is it? Spit it out."

Fengjiu, with great fervor, drew closer. "To be honest, I think you are an honorable man, yet there's one thing I would like to ask." She now drew even closer. "Were you really the one to lure Donghua Dijun into the Wicked Lotus Sphere? I used to believe so, but from what I see today, such underhanded trickery isn't something an honorable man like you would do."

This honorable Warrior Xiao Yan remained silent. The color of embarrassment crept onto his face and at last he answered, "That's... that's right. It was I. So what?"

Fengjiu discreetly showed her surprise.

His shame turned into anger. "That Ice Face isn't a good person either. You shouldn't be staying with him!"

Fengjiu continued to display her surprise and said, "Please go on."

According to Warrior Xiao Yan, it was by mistake that he locked Donghua into the Wicked Lotus Sphere that year. It started out then like it did today, a fight between two peers. Everything was open and honest.

At the time, he was very much in love with Princess Jiheng. When he heard her brother had arranged her marriage, he was overwrought with worry. Since the Demon clan had always held power and strength with utmost importance, he thought if he could defeat Donghua in a fight, Jiheng would change her view, and he could come to her brother for her hand in marriage. The chances of success were on his side.

Mustering his lifelong learning, he wrote a three-inch by one-inch duel invitation and asked Granny Duomu to pass it on to Donghua. Seven days later, Granny Duomu returned with a reply from the King. He claimed it was tea harvesting season at Taichen Palace and therefore he couldn't leave his domestic responsibilities. He declined.

To Yan Chiwu, Donghua's excuse was one of perfect reason. Tea picking had always been important for those gentle folks. On the other hand, he couldn't be reconciled with letting go of the duel. Thus he snuck into Taichen Palace one night and sweated away at picking tea leaves for Donghua. He was even going to sort them out and pack them once the picking was done, then Donghua would feel gratitude and set aside a few hours for their fight. But Donghua didn't do what normal people would. He casually received the tea bags and said his thanks. Then he casually mentioned there were a few fragrant plants which needed planting. Yan Chiwu thought Donghua was testing him, and thus immediately agreed. But upon arriving in the field, he saw that there wasn't just a few plants, there were dozens of them. He sweated for two more days to plant all of them before he returned to see Donghua. Nevertheless, the King still claimed there were things that kept him busy, such as the two lotus ponds that needed care. So Yan Chiwu went and fixed the lotus ponds as well. After he was done with the ponds, Donghua claimed it had been too long

since Taichen Palace was repaired; there were also the ripe apricots in the front lawn that needed picking...

Yan Chiwu swiftly went to the front lawn. Donghua stayed behind and leisurely sunbathed under the wisteria tree while he fished. His maidservants were also at leisure, the entire palace was at leisure! For the sake of one fight, Yan Chiwu put all of Taichen Palace into reparation. When he was finally done with everything, he once again reminded Donghua of the duel and his promise. Donghua held a Buddhist scripture in his hand and didn't once look up. "When did I promise you?"

"You said so yourself. If I helped you with this and that, you would consider our duel."

Donghua slowly lifted his head. "Oh, I have considered it. I don't want to."

Stunned, Xiao Yan finally understood that Donghua was playing with him. Before sneaking into Taichen Palace, his two underlings had warned him of Donghua. Although the King was known to be austere, they feared he was perhaps odd in temperament. They thought their lord was too credulous and would likely get the short end of the stick. Xiao Yan had thought those two were speaking nonsense. Turned out he did waste all of this time only to be jested.

Bursting with indignation, he vowed to teach Donghua a lesson. That night he broke into the seven-story pagoda and stole the Soul-Locking Jade which Donghua had sealed away inside. He then used it to force Donghua to Mount Fuyu for their duel. The Biying Soul-Locking Jade was the lock which secured the Wicked Lotus Sphere where the vilest of the world was kept. It was used to imprison demonic souls that could not be enlightened. If it was lost, the entire world's welfare would be at stake.

Donghua, for this jade, had really chased him to Mount Fuyu. After trading a few strikes, Yan Chiwu belatedly realized he had wasted his energy doing errands for Donghua in previous days. Then for whatever

bewitching reason, he opened up the jade and trapped Donghua inside the Lotus Sphere...

In spite of what had been told before, that was the true start of everything.

At this time, Warrior Xiao Yan let escape a sigh and bitterly concluded, "It was all divine will."

Fengjiu couldn't help herself anymore and let out a laugh. Seeing Warrior Xiao Yan's gloomy face, she corrected her expression and said, "He had treated you poorly indeed. Please continue, continue."

Xiaoyan held his sword glumly then drily laughed. "I don't really hate him anymore. They say the best revenge is to pity your enemy, and I am pitying him very much as we speak."

Fengjiu sidled near him and discreetly leaned toward Yan Chiwu.

"To everyone in this world, Donghua is a god with neither desires nor wants. But I know for a fact he is affected by one person. Do you want to know who she is?"

"Jiheng," Fengjiu replied blankly.

Xiao Yan jumped up in surprise. "How did you know?"

Fengjiu bit her finger and cursed inwardly, "Dammit, so it really is Jiheng." Then with the same expression she casually said, "Go on, let's see if your story corresponds with what I know."

From Xiao Yan's words, there wasn't much difference in what Fengjiu had thought previously. Donghua indeed fell in love with Jiheng because she had taken care of him in the Wicked Lotus Sphere. She knew the beginning of this story even better than Xiao Yan. That was because when Jiheng was taking care of Donghua in the Lotus Sphere, she was there herself and witnessed it too. Only, she was just a little fox who couldn't speak.

If she could help it, she wouldn't have turned into a fox at that specific time either. But she had made a little promise to her collaborator. It was a long story.

She was sweeping the front lawns of Taichen Palace at the time she caught news of Donghua going to Mount Fuyu. She immediately threw the broom aside and hastily made way to the South land.

When she reached Mount Fuyu, the fight was already over. There only remained the remnants of the brutal battle. In the middle of the scorched terrain was an arid lake, and in the middle of the dried up mud inside the lake was a jade mound about ten meters tall. The two opponents who were supposed to be fighting were nowhere to be found. She only saw a strange man who despite the blistering weather, was covered in a fur coat. He stood on a cloud under the scorching sun, in his hand was a small heater. He turned toward Fengjiu and asked, "Did you come to save someone?"

Fengjiu stared at him and felt extremely hot.

The jade mound in the dried mud was the Soul Locking Jade. Donghua was trapped somewhere in there. Because a deity was trapped inside, Yan Chiwu couldn't take it with him and already went home in cheerfulness. The unidentified man draped in mink was the Black Ghoulish Lord Nie Chuyin who happened to pass by wanting to see if he could pick up some convenient gains.

It was easy to enter yet difficult to leave the Soul-Locking Jade. When Donghua created it, he intentionally left room for some flaws. For example, if a deity was trapped inside, the lock would not be able to move anywhere. Thinking he had nothing to gain, Nie Chuyin was about to leave when at that exact moment Fengjiu hastily trotted forth. With nine scarlet tails behind her, she was indeed Fengjiu of the Bai family.

Nie Chuyin had no hobby other than collecting velvety beautiful pelts. His harem of wives were all furry mammals in their original forms. It was enough to show his obsession. Normally immortals did not look through

each other's original forms out of etiquette, but Nie Chuyin could care less. Bypassing her adolescent face which was already quite gorgeous, the first thing he saw was her original form and the nine majestic red tails which followed behind her.

He gestured toward Fengjiu and asked, "Are you one of the fairies? Donghua's ally, are ya? You came to save him?" At her nod, he laughed heartily. "Yan Chiwu locked him up inside the Wicked Lotus Sphere under there. I reckon you can't go in to save him with the power you have." At this moment, he paused and his laugh became even heartier. "Will you barter with me? Let me borrow your fur along with your nine tails for three years and I'll lend you half of my power to save him. What do you say?"

The situation was urgent. The moment Fengjiu heard Donghua was trapped within the Lotus Sphere, half her soul had flown away. By the time it floated back, she only heard that Nie Chuyin was going to lend her half of his power to save Donghua. There were still good people in the world, she thought... although his attire was really starting to make her feel faint.

She nodded rapidly. The contract was made. A white light flashed and while she still wasn't quite sure what was happening, both her fur and tails were taken away. She now realized she had missed hearing the important half in haste. Losing the nine tails wasn't a big deal. At most she'd have a plain behind that wasn't pretty. But losing her fur meant losing her appearance and magic. Fortunately, Nie was at least kind enough to give her a temporary coat of ordinary fairy fox fur. Honestly, it wasn't the time to reason; saving Donghua was more important.

Whenever she recalled this stretch of memory, she always felt her grand entrance into the Wicked Lotus Sphere was absolutely magnificent.

At that time, a luminous halo circled her head. Her feet rode on two clouds as she grew hundred-fold in size and entered the Lotus Sphere. A gasp of her breath produced whirlwind, a puff of her cough hurled fireballs, and a

wheeze of her sneeze released lightning bolts, she was the very definition of a mobile weapon.

How brilliant and impressive she had been. But whether Donghua noticed her brilliance or not, she still had no idea after all these years.

Inside the boundless world, Donghua had created a boundless force field. On the other side of the force field were lurking shadows of innumerable demonic souls. Whatever sorcery Donghua had used, on this side of the force field, the Cang'he sword twenty meters away from him had split into seventy-two blade images and filed into two lines. These blades had, for some reason, transformed into rows upon rows of Sal trees. Their roots and branches entwined each other and flowering Bodhi vines grew out from them. In a blink they flowered, then in a blink they wilted, bringing down a petal shower scattering in the sky. The airborne petals formed into an eight-spoke silver lotus Dharmachakra moving impressively. The wheel kept moving like the Dharma which brought eternal life. From the eternal Dharma wheel suddenly released ten thousand golden beams which penetrated through the force field aiming straight at the ferocious demons on the other side. Illuminated by the expounding golden light, the foremost ones immediately prostrated in deference. It had seemed a time-consuming magic, but in reality it was merely a moment of thought. It did not even equate the time it took for a sand speck to reach the ground from one's fingertips.

Many years later, Fengjiu found out that this fancy magic was derived from the Dharmachakra technique of the Western Heavens. Its purpose was to bless sentient beings using Buddha's nimbus. There had only been three people who mastered this technique in the world. At the time, she hadn't known it to be so rare. She had only mused in excitement that if her Taozhu sword could also transform and turn into seventy-two broomsticks, how fast sweeping the yard would be.

The three who learned this magic were the Buddha of the Western Heavens, Moyuan of Mount Kunlun, and Donghua before her eyes. The first two had unquestionably attained a bodhicitta state of mind, and did

regularly use it to bless lives; Donghua was just forced to use it. If he wanted to leave the Wicked Lotus Sphere, he could only destroy the world which the Soul-Locking Jade was securing. If he didn't take care of all the demonic souls, they would be released to the outside when this environment was destroyed. To kill them with a slash of his blade as he would normally do was only going to create more resentment to plague the world. There were always treacherous people waiting to take advantage of such things and wreak greater havoc on civilization. For this reason, Donghua took the longer route of salvation. Even if there was some who couldn't be enlightened, the number would still be much reduced. Enlightening others took great effort, yet there were tens of thousands of demonic souls. Employing the Buddha's nimbus once had already consumed most of Donghua's energy. He hadn't time to recuperate while outside the force field remained wickedness yet to be enlightened.

It wasn't often Donghua was in trouble. Fengjiu treasured her chance and happily jumped onto the stage of history. Once she set foot on this stage, Fengjiu was eager to show off. Firstly, today was different. She had borrowed half of Nie Chuyin's magic and was now a truly powerful fox. Secondly, Donghua was watching from below. It wasn't often she could show off in front of him; if she didn't flaunt a little, it'd be a waste being swindled by Nie Chuyin.

She caught the wind and bravely jumped out of Donghua's force field. The demons were slow to react due to the Buddha's nimbus moments ago. Above them came hurling down a series of fireballs and lightning bolts. Both were exceptionally precise; one hundred strikes, one hundred hits. They came to her rounds after rounds, these regularly terrorizing demons. She easily destroyed them all in one go.

Of course, she was also wounded; all were accidents. Because she had not mastered the skill, she charred some of the fur on her stomach and got a few blisters while spitting fireballs. She wasn't particular great at firing electric rays either. She raised her paw to shoot but forgot to retrieve it back, and so they hit her fore limb and she was burned there too...

Being caught unprepared, she didn't feel the pain right away. Then it suddenly hit her out of the blue. It penetrated deep into her bones and organs. She fell down from the cloud and passed out in pain. She didn't know that when she fell, she was caught in Donghua's arms who was looking up at her from below.

It happened many years ago, but Fengjiu still remembered she hadn't awaken right away.

Instead, she dreamed a dream.

It was similar to the tale in which Buddha sacrificed himself to save a starving tigress²⁴. It was filled with magnanimity.

In her dream, the scorching sun blazed from above and the air was swirling with smoke and dust. The Blue Sea had dried up into 81 parcels of land.

Out on the field was a stone bed. Donghua was lying on it, seemingly starved for days on out.

She watched him with a throbbing heart. For some reason she was able to talk, and she offered him her limb. "Why don't you gnaw on my limb for now? It's already grilled. Fat is still dripping, look."

Donghua took her front paw, gave some thought, and actually took a bite as told. It was painful, but sweet feelings took over as she asked him, "I especially grilled it crispy on the outside but succulent on the inside. Isn't it juicy and nice?"

He held something in his hand and said, "I think we need more salt."

Salt rained down like white snowflakes. She yelped painfully and woke up in sweat.

²⁴ This is one of the well-known Buddhist stories in which Buddha (as Prince Sattva) came upon a starving tigress one day and sacrificed himself to be the tigress's food so that she wouldn't eat her cubs out of desperation.

Her eyes flew open and the person in view was indeed Donghua, but the one holding her injured limb was a beautiful woman dressed in white whom she had never met before. Her limb was covered in a dark poultice. The woman tore her skirt then used the thin silk strip to adeptly wrap her injured leg.

Fengjiu later found out that this beauty was the famous Jiheng. When she heard that she was the cause of Yan Chiwu and Donghua's fight, she had hastily come to Mount Fuyu hoping to dissuade the two of them. She got lost on the way and arrived late, however. Then, somehow, she fell into the Wicked Lotus Sphere and met Donghua who was trapped in here.

Many years later when everything had passed, Fengjiu finally realized Jiheng had more fate with Donghua than she did. She never gave much thought to this before. In those days, she laid on Jiheng's lap and her eyes were filled with the reflection of Donghua sitting a few paces across from them. Her heart drummed in adoration, and there was no room to think about other people's business.

By then, two thousand years had already passed since Donghua first saved her on Mount Qinyao.

In those two thousand years, their closest proximity occurred when Donghua fished by the pond in the front yard and she swept the other side of the pond, when Donghua played chess by the lily pond in the backyard and she swept across from him, and when Donghua watered the tea plants in the garden and she swept the ground nearby. Although she never gazed too closely at Donghua over the years, his image had been engraved in her heart from the very first day. She knew his face better than she had known her textbooks.

He hadn't changed at all. He was still as handsome and regal as ever, but since he lost some divine energy, he had the lethargy of one who had just woken up from a nap. He sat languidly and watched Jiheng's quick fingers weave through Fengjiu's fiery red fur. He was quiet in his observance.

Jiheng was very fluid in her motions, but all pretty women in the Demon clan liked to keep their fingernails long. Fengjiu's tender flesh couldn't withstand Jiheng's accidental scrapes. As she moaned painfully, Donghua picked up a few pieces of silk dipped in rainwater and said to Jiheng, "Let me." Not knowing that he had absolutely no experience in dressing wounds, Fengjiu kept whimpering for him. She even sniffled pitifully.

When the Lotus Sphere fell into darkness, warm mist gently drifted up and circled the force field. Surrounded within these foggy layers, the force field had appeared to be floating.

The dew-moistened silk was wrapped around her limb and belly. Donghua with the same nonchalance was so much gentler than Jiheng. Fengjiu's pain lessened and he was done before she knew it. When he dressed her wound, he had seemed so patient and attentive. She had once seen this look on him when he was glazing the ceramics; it was this same ironic look of both focus and nonchalance. How she loved this countenance of his.

As he knotted the final knot, Jiheng neared them and asked, "Your Majesty, how... is she going to move if you wrap her up like this?"

Fengjiu raised her limb which was wrapped like a squash and blinked. The soaked bandage wasn't going to dry for at least another ten days. Her leg felt cool and wet, and she didn't feel pain anymore. But standing on only three legs wasn't as stable. The moment she fell over, she was luckily lifted into Donghua's arms. He held out her wrapped limb in front of her and said, "Try breathing out a fireball."

Fengjiu didn't really know why but she did as told and breathed one out. When it touched the silk, it made a sizzling sound and died away. Donghua stamped out the rest of the ember and said, "It should be thick so that it wouldn't burn through to the inside."

Jiheng confusedly looked at Fengjiu then realized Donghua's meaning and laughed, "From my humble understanding, this baby fox was wounded because of the grave situation we were in. She wouldn't injure herself

under normal circumstances. Your Majesty had worried unnecessarily.” Seeing Fengjiu dilating her eyes in realization and indignation, Jiheng considerably added, “She looks quite smart, she can’t be that stupid.”

Fengjiu developed a friendly feeling toward Jiheng because of this praise.

Donghua was petting the soft baby fur on her head. Hearing this, he glanced down and said, “Can’t say for sure.”

Fengjiu felt Donghua had misunderstood her vastly. She knew he had always preferred smart animals. One after another, his riding beast had been smarter than the last. That itself was proof enough. After much thought, she concluded the only way to erase Donghua's false impression was to discharge a fireball which could harm others but not herself. So she huffed and puffed to release a fireball she had conjured inside her belly. But because she heaved too hard, her throat got itchy and she coughed a series of choked flame. Opposing wind caught the flame and blew it on her good leg, her fur instantly catching on fire.

Donghua quickly grabbed her leg and released frost energy from the tips of his fingers to freeze the fireball. He carried her up and muttered to Jiheng, or perhaps to himself, “Not so smart after all.” Fengjiu gazed at her burnt right leg and ashamedly looked away from Donghua's stare. She was sad, pained, and embarrassed all at once.

In Fengjiu’s aged and discolored memory, she had lived with Donghua and Jiheng for seven days inside the Wicked Lotus Sphere. To break out of this world, Donghua had had to use that time to recover his divine energy. They said home was where a peaceful heart resided. Fengjiu was at peace next to Donghua’s side. Even the barren Lotus Sphere became delightful to her. Too bad her front limb was injured and wasn’t conducive to movements. Otherwise, she’d already roll on the ground in celebration.

Donghua meditated each day. Jiheng was the one to search for food. After searching everywhere, she discovered that there were only yams in this place. The princess’s cultivation would allow her to go one full year without food, and there was no need to mention Donghua. But Fengjiu lost

a large amount of energy after the battle. Her stomach sank into her ribcage just after the first day without food. For this reason, Jiheng had to work so hard at scavenging food especially for her. What a good person Jiheng was to have treated her so kindly. The first few days Fengjiu could breathe a fireball and roast her own yams. But she didn't expect Nie Chuyin to be so calculating. The power he lent her only lasted three days at most; after three days it automatically went away, leaving behind not even a wisp of smoke. Jiheng practiced water magic, so she couldn't help Fengjiu start a fire either. How sad. She was a little picky. She couldn't eat if the yams weren't roasted.

At this time, Donghua was sitting in therapeutic meditation nearby. Surrounding him was a tremendous and beautiful white flame resembling a reincarnating phoenix. Because the Blue Sea where he came from gathered the extreme of Yin, he had always needed celestial fire to equalize the forces. Each time he completed a level of recovery, he would need to train under celestial fire before he could harness the energy to his advantage. Jiheng stared in awe. Fengjiu was younger than Jiheng and thus was even more in awe. Her eyes shone bright. She withstood pain and placed her left limb on the ground. With her right limb, she threw a yam with all her might into the flame. She was elated to see it going in, and proceeded to throw about seven or eight more. Then she quietly sat on the side to wait. Sure enough, the celestial flame eventually went out and gave way to the aroma of roasted yam. A few rolled on the ground, two more were in his lap.

Jiheng gaped at Fengjiu in shock. Ignoring her stare, Fengjiu happily tottered to the yams and carefully drew the two from Donghua's lap. Then she gathered the others up into a small stash.

She hadn't finished when Donghua lifted her up by her nape. Jiheng flinched and closed her eyes. Fengjiu was still clutching onto a piping hot yam at this point, her stomach closed to being burnt. But Donghua was holding her so high up that it'd be a shame to let go of the yam and smashing it in the process.

He glanced at her and took the yam away. "Are you going to eat all of this at once?"

Fengjiu rounded her eyes and nodded vigorously. She was trying her best to recuperate, so naturally she had a good appetite. Donghua frowned and placed her back down on the ground. Then he broke the yam into two and gave her the smaller piece. "You can only eat this much today."

She couldn't believe her ears. Her legs went wobbly. It was so little, how would she get full. Donghua continued to coolly tell her, "Or you can go to that big rock for a half-hour time-out. Then I'll let you have the rest."

Fengjiu dejectedly took half of her yam and went to the rock to stand. Jiheng sneaked over and squatted before her, "Do you know how afraid I was for you when you threw the yams at His Majesty's forehead?" Fengjiu turned and ignored her. She didn't say one thing to help. And she called herself a friend. Jiheng turned Fengjiu around and laughed, "His Majesty was only joking with you. Guess what I just saw? Heavenly fire is actually not good for roasting yams. It's better to roast them slowly over a small fire. Otherwise the yam will sear on the outside but stay uncooked on the inside. You'll get a stomachache that way. His Majesty is grilling the other ones for you right now. They'll be done once your time-out is up and he'll give them all back to you."

That evening Fengjiu had the best roasted yams she ever tasted in the last 300 centuries.

She had learned that a person's mental memory was very easily tangled, especially for immortals who lived as long as they did, but a person's palate memory would turn into natural instincts. For instance, she could still remember the taste of her mother's home-cooked dishes in her childhood no matter how long it had been; it was the same with Donghua's roasted yams that afternoon.

While gazing upon Jiheng's luminous face as the princess talked to Donghua, Fengjiu had sometimes felt envious. But when the Lotus Sphere immersed into nighttime, she was rather glad she was a red fox. At such

times Jiheng would rest in another cave to avoid rumors, but Fengjiu was able to sleep next to Donghua. Furthermore, Donghua really did like furry animals. Whenever temperature dropped during the nights, even if she felt she could endure it, he would hold her close to keep her warm.

At first she was a smidge shy within his embrace. But after a day or two she couldn't even remember how to spell the word, always nudging her paws on Donghua's hand. When they slept, she pretended to be oblivious and stuck closely to his body. If Donghua backed away an inch she would move forward two inches. If Donghua turned to a different spot, she would shamelessly mewl the way she used to do with her mother. Quite useful, this tactic.



It drizzled on their last day inside the Lotus Sphere. Donghua used magic to produce a clear round dome. Fengjiu leaned on it as she watched the evening rain. Raindrops from the infinite sky fell down in a color as vividly green as kingfisher jade. Starlight emphasized the glistening drops. She thought of tomorrow when they would be leaving this place. What if Donghua wouldn't take her to Heaven with him, and they would have to

separate anyhow. Even if she were to sneak into Taichen Palace again, she would have to wait three more years. She sadly shook her head and felt more woeful listening to the rainfall. She turned around to go to bed when she saw Donghua already fast asleep. His long silver hair flowed down like snow on a mountaintop, or moonlight on the Milky Way. In his sleep he seemed to have been sculpted from ice.

Fengjiu's eyes twinkled, her sadness instantly left behind to the nine levels of clouds. She tiptoed to Donghua. She knelt before his face and quietly gazed at him for a time. When she decided he was soundly asleep, she closed her eyes and stepped closer, wanting to kiss him. She had wanted to do so for a long time but Donghua had been meditating these past several nights. She could never wait for him and always fell asleep first. Heaven took pity on her tonight and finally granted her this chance. She was overjoyed.

But she was only a fox at this point in time. Thus it was a bit problematic to kiss him on the lips. She hesitated for half a day and finally licked the corner of his lips with one quick stroke. Then she lay down promptly and pretended to fall asleep. Donghua remained still. She waited a few more seconds, nudged him a few times, and licked his cheek twice more. Seeing that he still gave no response, her courage grew and she placed her two front paws on his shoulders. She licked his brow and nose, but was too shy to touch his lips.

How beautiful his lips were, pale and cold at first glance... would they feel just as cold as they looked if she were to lick... no, her action was holier than that, if she were to kiss him. She hesitated momentarily. "This is my first kiss," she thought. Ceremoniously, she lightly brushed his lips. In that instant, the King who was supposed to be fast asleep suddenly lifted his eyes. Fengjiu's own eyes widened. She had thought this could happen and had prepared herself for it. Only... how bitter it was that her first kiss was also the shortest this world had ever witnessed.

Starlight twinkled like countless gems. Emerald raindrops fell above the clear dome, bubbles bursting here and there making musical sounds like

those from a seven-string zither. Donghua's face was covered in her saliva, yet his expression remained unchanged as he steadily gazed at her.

Fengjiu paused and demurely retreated her tongue. Then she raised her paw to wipe clean the saliva on Donghua's face and acted as if nothing had happened. What a fox she was. Donghua wouldn't think too much into it. She just had to pretend to be his pet; such was her plan.

She innocently looked back at Donghua for a while and as she predicted, everything was still alright. Although it didn't last very long, to be able to kiss Donghua's lips was already quite a sum. She yawned and lay down to sleep, unconsciously caressing Donghua with her paws again. Outside the dome, rain was starting to cease. She hazily entered her dreams. Giving Donghua no consideration, she turned and spun in every which direction in her sleep, sometimes straight, sometimes spread eagle.

When Fengjiu woke up the next morning, the vast sky opened in front of her eyes. Small jadeite puddles were left from the rain the night before. The water surfaces glistened under the sunlight like sparkling ornaments. Donghua meditated from a spot afar. Jiheng found firestones and dry hay somewhere and was making a fire to roast more yams for Fengjiu. She unhurriedly walked toward Jiheng to see how the princess was making a fire. Her stomach for some reason was slightly bloated and she burped once. She continued burping a series of seven or eight times when finally Jiheng caressed her bloated stomach. Donghua probably had finished meditating and slowly made his way over to help Jiheng with the fire.

At this time, Jiheng was flipping Fengjiu on her back to observe her stomach. She worriedly called to Donghua, "Dijun, can you come over and take a look? The baby fox seems to be ill." Fengjiu was lying on her back with all four limbs pointing to the sky. Still sleepy, she lifted her eyes to see Donghua's shoes stopping in front of her. He sat down next to Jiheng and also rubbed her round stomach. She blushed. To have a man rub her stomach like this was very different from her licking his face. Only people who were intimate with one another should act this way. Her limbs started to shake in anxiety.

Jiheng asked with bated breath, "What's wrong with the baby fox? The Wicked Lotus Sphere is teemed with vileness. She was injured just a few days ago, too. Did foul energy enter her body?"

Donghua held Fengjiu's limb to check her pulse and answered, "No." Although Fengjiu had laid half her mind on the fact that Donghua was holding her hand, she still used the other half to care about her health. Hearing Donghua's answer, she finally relaxed. But in his unchanging calm voice, he added, "It's a good pulse." He looked straight into her wide foxy eyes and said, "We've got happy news."

Jiheng was thunderstruck. The firestone in her hand dropped and fell onto Fengjiu's hind leg. Fengjiu's sleepiness dissipated entirely. After half a day, she finally processed her senses as she gasped while tears came down in two streams from her round eyes.

Like cold snow on a foggy night, Donghua massaged Fengjiu's bruised limb and added in his deadpan way, "Didn't the fox elder tell you? Your clan has a very strict regulation. You can't be naughty with others, for once you cozy up to someone, it's very easy to..."

He hadn't finished when Jiheng stuttered on the side, "I... I have never... heard of this."

Donghua shifted his eyes, "Are you also a fox?"

Jiheng shook her head.

Unhurriedly, he replied, "Then of course they wouldn't tell you their clan's secret."

Fengjiu was absolutely bewildered. She wasn't a fairy fox, but she was indeed in its form right now. Perhaps wearing its fur also granted her some of the clan's special traits. Although she had always wanted to have some progress in their relationship, she hadn't thought it would progress to this point.

If it was her child, she should still have it, shouldn't she? But how was childbirth like, anyway? She heard there were many things one should pay

attention to during a pregnancy. Who should she ask about this? Furthermore, whose surname should this baby take? Donghua didn't have a surname. Considering family backgrounds and clan ancestries, it was still best for him to take her family name Bai. But an official name was too important for her to decide by herself. He needed a nickname at home, though. Could they call him Bai Gungun?

In a flash, ten thousand things passed through her mind. She unsteadily crawled up and stepped over to a quiet place to think about the future. There was a tinge of sadness in her shadow; she hadn't noticed the mischievous smile in Donghua's cold eyes which promptly died just as it flickered.

How stupid she was back then. She didn't know pranking others was a special hobby of Donghua's. If it had been the quiet Yehua or Moyuan who was offended, they would normally pay no attention to the whole thing. Or if it had been Liansong who actually preferred to be offended, he'd get to return the favor a hundred-fold. As for Donghua... this person was a bit special. Since the beginning of time, few offended him and still came out alive.

It was quite embarrassing, truth be told. After one whole month of being fooled by Donghua, she finally realized there was going to be no happy seed just because she had kissed him once. After Donghua brought her to Jiuchongtian, she went to see Siming to ask for his advice on prenatal care. Fengjiu still remembered Siming had scoffed then and pointed to the sky to vow: "Your Highness, Donghua got you fooled. If you suddenly have a little Donghua in your stomach just from kissing him, then I'll have a little Siming in my stomach from not even kissing anyone."

If Siming had vowed on his own life, she guessed he must be telling her the truth. But after finding out the truth, she disappointingly felt a little rueful and sad.

As for what Yan Chiwu said about Donghua falling in love with Jiheng in the Wicked Lotus Sphere, she never heard of this before. In her memory, Donghua broke the Lotus Sphere into smithereens with one slash of the

sword. The Soul Locking Jade also crumbled into dusts as a result. Jiheng and he were at most sitting buddies on Mount Fuyu at that time. Afterward, they each went their own way.

At that time, Fengjiu was extremely worried that Donghua wouldn't take her back to Taichen Palace with him. She was just a fox with no clear background while he also favored peace and quiet. Jiheng also seemed to like her a lot. What if he gave her to Jiheng?

As a fluffy animal, she was born to be a favorite amongst the ladies. On top of that, she understood the human language so everyone adored her even more. When they said goodbyes, Jiheng as suspected asked Donghua to let her have Fengjiu. Donghua was changing her bandage at the time, and he promptly declined. On the outside Fengjiu acted as if Donghua's answer merely passed by her eyes, but on the inside she was doing somersaults of joy. When she lifted her head and saw Jiheng's misty eyes on that exquisite face of hers, however, she felt a little sorry for the princess. So for the princess's sake, she produced some tears of her own and looked at Jiheng with the saddest longing.

Jiheng was indeed sensitive as she caught onto Fengjiu's subtle expression. Wiping the tears in her eyes, she determinedly fought with Donghua for Fengjiu. "The baby fox also wants to be with me. Look, she knows we're about to part and that's why she's so sad. If this is what she wants..."

This was proving to be problematic. Fengjiu was about to take back her tears when Donghua lifted her up. She blinked and saw that he was slightly frowning. In a flash, she was pushed into his sleeve.

"She's only an ignorant cub who doesn't know anything yet. The overwhelming foul energy in the Demon realm won't be good for her," he replied in a cold distant voice.

She struggled to peek her head out from his sleeve. Nearby were two floating clouds waiting for them. Before Jiheng could say another word, Donghua had taken her and stepped onto the cloud, riding away on the wind. Fengjiu felt Donghua had badmouthed her. Because the nine-tailed

fox family spent the majority of their time under human forms, they did become a little slow when they turned back into their original fox form. But she was more than 30,000 years old; she wasn't an ignorant cub.

She held onto Donghua's sleeve and turned back to look at Jiheng. The princess ran after them in tears. "Dijun, how can you fight with me over a baby fox? Can't you be generous and let me have her just for a short while? Just one month, no, half a month, no, ten days. Can't it be just for ten days...?"

Fengjiu couldn't believe it. Was she already so alluring at this young age? She certainly had not lost to her aunt Bai Qian or her uncle Bai Zhen. Donghua definitely heard Jiheng's words, but he calmly went on, clearly choosing to ignore them. Fengjiu, on the other hand, was touched at Jiheng's words and promised within her heart to repay the princess one day. But at the same time she also noted that Jiheng didn't understand one thing about Donghua. Generosity and similar worldly nonsense weren't things he generally cared about.

Fengjiu's intact memories in regard to Jiheng ended here. The rest was merely bits and pieces revolving around Jiheng's arrival at Taichen Palace as Donghua's betrothed.

Fengjiu's life retreated into the shadows when she heard the news of Donghua's impending matrimony. Sadness took over her days, and from her poor memory, she could only notice that that was the first time the desolate palace was overtaken with happiness and commotion since she arrived there. Although Donghua still took her everywhere with him, be it to play chess or to read books, her heart weighed a ton and she was no longer feeling the contentment and happiness of being next to him.

The princess kept trying to approach Fengjiu. She even handmade many dishes to please the fox she once adored from the Lotus Sphere. But Fengjiu felt ill at ease whenever she saw Jiheng's beautiful face, and thus always avoided her. One night when Fengjiu returned to the palace, she saw Jiheng sitting by the white jade bridge with some roasted yams in her hands. Her face lit up as she waved Fengjiu over. But Fengjiu quickly fled

behind the arched doorway. As she turned to peek at Jiheng one last time, she saw the princess's smile dying along with the twilight, looking utterly forlorn. Fengjiu stayed behind the doorway until Jiheng silently turned to leave with the roasted yams still in her hand. Her sight turned vague as the sunlight blinded her eyes.

In looking back many years later, Fengjiu realized there always existed different fates between people. These countless threads of fate intertwined into what they knew as the great trichiliocosm. As an immortal, she should've looked past her own fate and into the vast cosmos existence. But instead, she put too much importance on herself and Donghua that she failed to see anything else. All she had to do was look into his eyes and she'd be blinded in other matters. She was right next to Donghua, the person closest to him, yet she knew of neither his feelings for Jiheng nor even his fate with Zhi'he. In hindsight, it was rather shameful. She was a goddess, yet she wasn't any wiser than the mortals themselves. While reflecting on herself after she returned to Qingqiu, she tried to remember whether Donghua had truly been in love with Jiheng, but she couldn't recall much. Then gradually, she came to put the entire thing out of her mind.

She hadn't expected that on this day, two hundred years later, she would be enlightened by Yan Chiwu, the very same person who started the wretched fate between her, Donghua, and Jiheng. The word 'fate' was indeed a thing of wonder.

In early June, Fanyin Valley's scorching sun burned bright. Warrior Xiao Yan continuously wiped his forehead as he gazed to the floating clouds afar. Sitting next to Fengjiu, he talked of Donghua's only romance in these past thousands of years. In his opinion, there was nothing good about this love tale.

Chapter 06

Fengjiu knew the beginning of this love tale. At that time, Jiheng's and her fate hadn't yet intertwined with each other.

On that day 300 years ago, when divine radiance broke out of Mount Fuyu, Donghua stepped out of the Wicked Lotus Sphere with valiant force. The first thing he did wasn't to look for Yan Chiwu, but instead to bring her back to Taichen Palace. On the open 13th sky under dense shades of the Sal trees, dozens of prostrated elders lined the way from the celestial entrance to the palace gate to await their punishment for failing to protect the Soul Locking Jade. Donghua walked on and entered the palace amid expanses of blue clouds and Buddhist chants. No one dared to raise his head; each knew the guilt he carried. Many of them were brave warriors from the dawn of time, whose faces Fengjiu recognized from her school books.

Donghua entrusted her to Zhonglin, his most trusted steward in Taichen Palace. But Fengjiu didn't want someone else to tend to her. In her mind, Donghua was the best at changing her bandage, cleansing her wound, and brushing her fur. She clung onto his robe with her tiny claws and refused to let him go. Donghua held her an arm-length away. Her short legs couldn't reach him no matter how hard she tried. She finally gave up as her face plopped gloomily.

The two daring maidservants who stood nearby giggled in amusement. Fengjiu glared at them angrily. Even Donghua's cold eyes beamed a rare smile at this time. He lifted her up and laid her on the bed, then petted her head. Fengjiu thought he would indulge her again, so she started to climb back into his robe, but Donghua by this time had drawn a circle around her, encasing her inside a force field. "This baby fox is very playful," he told the servants. "Take good care of it. Don't let it run around lest its leg injury gets worse."

Fengjiu still wanted to come along. She used her crybaby tactic again and pretended to wipe tears from her eyes. He leaned against the windowsill to observe her. "I enjoy making others cry. Why don't you cry louder?"

Her cries immediately halted in her throat. Once she stopped, he stepped closer and stroked her head. "Be good and listen to Zhonglin. I'll come back for you once I take care of everything." She stared up at him, and at long last finally nodded in defeat.

Fengjiu sighed. Everything that happened seemed like yesterday. Several days went by but Donghua didn't come back for her. In the end she couldn't wait anymore and tricked Zhonglin into removing the force field. On her way to look for Donghua, she met Siming at the South Heaven Gate. In the past, she hadn't thought anything significant could happen in those few days, but now that centuries had passed, she learned from listening to Yan Chiwu that there had been quite a few things which transpired, and they were all significant.

This was the latter half of the story between herself, Donghua, and Jiheng that she hadn't known before.

In the days Donghua went missing, he had gone to look for Warrior Xiao Yan for another duel. Warrior Xiao Yan glossed over this event with careful screening and pruning. Mr. Yan wiped his nose and concluded, "After the fight, he should've scrambled back to where he came from. For what reason did he wander around Mount Baishui?"

Fengjiu wore a large leaf she found by the cliff-side to keep the blistering sun out. She answered Xiao Yan, "Maybe he had time left after the fight, so he went to Mount Baishui looking for the Longnao plant and the Blue..."

Her words hit a touchy spot in Warrior Xiao Yan's sensitive heart. His angry and hurt eyes pushed back the word 'lotus' from coming out of Fengjiu's mouth.

"Look at my strapping body. Am I a chum in your eyes? How could he go sightseeing after a fight with me?"

Fengjiu gamely looked back at Xiao Yan. She calmly fixed the leaf atop her head and replied, "Of course not. What I meant was... maybe he went to Mount Baishui looking for herbs to treat his wounds."

Warrior Xiao Yan seemed to like this explanation enough. He nodded in all seriousness. "You're right. Ice Face had to have gone to Mount Baishui for healing herbs." He then went on: "If not, there would not be the saying 'Heaven is blind'. At that same time, Jiheng also came to Mount Baishui..."

Just as Fengjiu said, Donghua's trip to Mount Baishui was indeed to look for the two holy ingredients for a magical incense. In the marsh, there lived a blue lotus species and the parasitic Longnao plant which survived on it. They're ten thousand years in age and are together a wonder of Mount Baishui. Because these two plants depended on each other to live, there was a wooden scent in the lotus while there was a lotus fragrance in the wood. Countless incense-making monks had risked the journey to come here in search of them.

There were risks because the topography of the mountain was rather precarious. The marsh was also home to a vicious water serpent. In her childhood, Fengjiu had entertained the wish of subduing it into a domesticated pet. When Donghua returned and casually took out a pouch of dried Blue Lotus and some Longnao resin, she knew the water serpent she once wanted was likely toast.

As for Jiheng's trip to Mount Baishui, that involved a secret of the Demon Clan.

The Demon Clan had seven branches. Xuyang, Jiheng's brother, was the lord of the Red branch. Ever since Jiheng was still a child, her brother had instructed a personal bodyguard for her. He had a clever and beautiful countenance despite being low-born, earning adoration from the clan elders. Even Dowager Queen Wang who lived deep in the solitary inner palace held a special fondness for him. It was such that Xuyang didn't feel it right for that handsome of a bodyguard to serve Jiheng. When he wanted to pick someone less pretty, however, the first person to oppose was their very own mother. Dowager Queen Wang cried up a scene and eventually threatened to take her own life. Jiheng, who was still young, stood by crying along without knowing why. Minsu, the young bodyguard, pulled on his sleeve innocently and pleaded, "Your Majesty,

you've made the Dowager Queen cry. Console her quickly." Flummoxed, Xuyang had to give up.

The older Minsu grew, the prettier he became. The more Xuyang looked at him, the more wrong the kid had seemed. When they had meals, he didn't touch the nutritious parsley and eggplant. Xuyang frowned, this was not good. When he wore his pale blue robe, he looked as dainty as a leek. Jiheng sidled closer to compliment him. Xuyang frowned, this was not good. When he practiced fencing in the garden, he didn't have a towel with him. What if he caught a cold and couldn't take care of Jiheng? Xuyang frowned, this was not good. His horse was unhealthy these days. How would it travel a long distance if Jiheng needed him to run an errand? Xuyang frowned, this was not good. Thus Xuyang decreed four edicts at once: first, everyone had to eat parsley and eggplant at each meal; second, no one could wear pale blue inside the palace; third, everyone had to carry a towel to sword practice if he didn't want to be severely punished; fourth, there would be a royal stable and one may borrow a horse if one's horse was sick. Sure enough, Minsu eagerly came to borrow a horse the moment the stable was set up. Furthermore, he had been eating his greens these days and his once dainty body became much sturdier. Xuyang was pleased. Just for the sake of his little sister, he had had to do so much.

Being one of the seven Demon Lords, Xuyang's responsibilities were overwhelming. Yet now he had to add his sister and her handsome bodyguard onto his long list of burdens. How much did Minsu speak to Jiheng today? Was it a few lines more than yesterday? What was the closest proximity between Minsu and Jiheng? Wasn't it an inch closer than the day before? Each and every detail gave him headaches. Moreover, Xuyang's eyes could not help but follow Minsu whenever he was around to see whether the good-looking brat was treating his sister within boundaries or not. But by the time he sat down with the clan elders to discuss Jiheng's marriage, and decided to send her to Donghua Dijun's Taichen Palace, not one sign of romance between the two of them as had been imagined had surfaced. For some reason, he felt a little disappointed, but it was also the first time after many years he felt Minsu was perhaps... quite good. His

fluttering lashes when he lowered his eyes were rather lovable. From then on, his words and demeanor toward Minsu became markedly gentler.

But for some reason, thereafter, he often saw Minsu daydreaming by himself in the garden. On several occasions, Minsu didn't even notice Xuyang was standing in front of him. And when he did, he would dash away like a rabbit before Xuyang could get a word in. Once, he had been extremely curious. When Minsu wanted to flee again, he grabbed onto his collar to pull him back. Unexpectedly, the little brat even employed the molting method of the cicadas to flee from him, leaving behind a roomy robe in his hand. Xuyang held the robe as he remained rooted for a length of time. He didn't see Minsu for days after. He only saw once a corner of a robe from afar which resembled Minsu's. At a closer look it was gone. Xuyang suspected his eyesight was worsening as of late.

Xuyang had always paid attention to health and fitness since he was young. One day while taking a walk in the garden after lunch, he saw a figure resembling Minsu in the far distance by the lotus pond. He tiptoed over and sure enough, it was he, wearing a green robe and hunching over a boulder like a green squash doodling something. He appeared both concentrated and earnest. Xuyang knew Minsu had never liked writing ever since he was a child. At this age, he barely knew a few hundred words. What could he possibly even be writing? It was quite a curious thing. He quietly pondered for a while, then decided to lurk behind him to see what he was up to.

Lotus scent wafted in the cold air. Half of the parchment was covered in sloppy handwriting. The words seemed to string together to say, "How poetic, this rainy night. I stay awake longing for your sight." Being inexperienced, Xuyang could still tell this was a love poem. But the top wasn't addressed to anyone. It was hard to guess whom it was for.

Xuyang swiftly snatched the parchment from the marble table. Minsu looked up from his trance and blushed deep red. He reached his hand out to grab it back but it was too late.

The light breeze curled a corner of the paper up. Xuyang had to guess at each word with difficulty and at length read aloud two lines: "Bright moonbeams draped this lonely cell. I toss and turn to no avail." He paused to ask, "Who is this written for?"

Minsu was usually as animated as an infant monkey. But this time he kept his face glued to the ground, his ears burning red as he stood frozen on the spot.

Comprehension suddenly dawned on Xuyang. "For Jiheng?"

Minsu glanced up at him in surprise and quickly lowered his head again.

Xuyang continued standing in front of him. Seeing his implicitly concurring look, he was slowly overcome with fury. This little bodyguard dared to have feelings for his little sister yet he never left any traces behind. He thought to himself, was it because there was no obstacles to rouse him before, but now that he had arranged for Jiheng one of the best marriages in the world, it had caused the brat to let shown his hidden feelings? This appearance of his really looked as though he could no longer contain his feelings for Jiheng so he finally wrote a love poem for her. Of course, Jiheng was a lovable princess, and perfectly deserving of this poem... Xuyang ruminated in annoyance for a while, but he did not let it surface on his face. At length, he growled and turned to leave.

Two days later, the duel between Yan Chiwu and Donghua on Mount Fuyu made news all over the peaceful South land. Guilt led Jiheng to sneak away in the middle of a rainy night to stop the two of them. On the night Jiheng went away, several guards snuck into Minsu's room and neatly dragged him out of the palace gates while he was still lying unsuspecting and fully-clothed.

At that moment, Xuyang arranged a chess game by the water glass. He thought of his next move whilst he anxiously viewed the situation in the water glass. He saw that Minsu did not docilely let the guards tie him up at first, instead swiftly drawing the sword at his bed to block the sentry. But when the chief guard hesitantly told him: "His Majesty ordered you

banished to Mount Baishui to reflect on your transgression,” the sword in his hand clashed onto the floor. After he was tied up, Xuyang heard him sadly asked, “I know my offense is great... but are you sure His Majesty meant Mount Baishui?” The chief guard sighed, “His Majesty indeed said Mount Baishui.” Minsu bowed his head in silence after hearing the confirmation. From that angle, Xuyang couldn't see Minsu's expression. Only when they brought him away from Jiheng's quarters did he see the brat suddenly raise his head to turn and look at Chihong Hall, Xuyang's daily work place. His pale face was drained, yet his eyes were completely lucid.

Xuyang's decision to imprison Minsu at Mount Baishui was arrived at after much deliberation. Across the expansive terrain in the world, the largest land mass was the South land which was ruled by the Demons. Next was the West land, ruled by the Ghouls. The largest domain among countries such as the Qingqiu Kingdom of the nine-tailed white foxes, or bordering regions such as the southeast, northeast, southwest, and northwest areas, was the East mainland. And even it was only as large as the South land. The Heaven clan's territory was a bit vaster. The thirty-six celestial skies and the four seas in addition to the North land were all under their jurisdiction. Then again, they did have a greater population. Additionally, there was also an influx from the Mortal Realm of those who aspired for divinity joining the Heaven clan each year. The Heaven clan's burden also therefore multiplied. Nevertheless, the Demon clan by their ancestors' grace held onto the largest continental piece among the eight land masses. But within their extensive territory were also countless perilous locations. Mount Baishui was the most frightening of all. In the locals' minds, it was a mountain with no way out. Vertical cliffs erected on all four sides. Toxic air surrounded the perimeter year round. Plants native to this region were mostly poisonous. Wild beasts were hostile due to the extreme conditions. There was a way to die for every personal taste. To be lost in there was akin to being lost in a suicidal heaven. This was why it hadn't been without reasons that Minsu's expression darkened when he heard Xuyang wanted to imprison him on Mount Baishui.

It was all the same where he stayed to reflect on his transgression. Xuyang chose Mount Baishui firstly to split Jiheng and Minsu apart. He thought if Minsu mustered up enough courage to confess to Jiheng, being kind and naïve, Jiheng might actually accept him. That would only cause humiliation to the royal family. Secondly, if Minsu was brought to Mount Baishui, Jiheng would not be able to go to him even with their childhood friendship. She would probably come to look for him and cry up a scene, but it didn't matter. He only had one strategy, and that was to delay the situation until Jiheng could smoothly wed Donghua. He'd release Minsu at that time. Besides, Minsu had always had the unique constitution of being immune to all sorts of poisons. And while there were many treacherous beasts inhabiting Mount Baishui, if he couldn't handle them, he wasn't worthy of being the princess's bodyguard. With these thoughts, Xuyang casually ordered for Minsu to be brought to Mount Baishui.

Behind the water glass surface, Minsu's last glance in this direction caused the chess piece in Xuyang's hand to drop onto the table and roll down the ground. He recognized a bewildered look in those tranquil eyes. Xuyang picked up the stone and thought: he had never left Danling Palace his entire life; it wasn't a bad idea to let him train on Mount Baishui. But what if Minsu were to never return again? This never crossed his mind.

The night Jiheng returned from Mount Fuyu, the South Land was showered in a deluge of rain. Minsu's banishment to Mount Baishui unsurprisingly reached Jiheng's ears. Xuyang sat inside Chihong Hall and waited for his sister to come harangue him. But his tea was long emptied and still there was no sight of her. Not until Jiheng's maidservant came running to him in the morning did he find out his sister had disappeared during the night. Naturally, Jiheng went to Mount Baishui to save Minsu. His plan would have been perfect had he not forgotten his sister's righteousness.

The perilous route leading to the mountaintop became the destiny which led Jiheng to Donghua Dijun at the white water marsh.

Rain poured down ceaselessly for several days as though the Heavenly River was suddenly turned upside down. But for the red lotuses in Danling Palace, it was a rare chance to drink up heavenly water. They opened gloriously like red lanterns, offering a pleasant sight to the eyes. Troop after troop was sent away, disturbing even the Dowager Queen in the inner chambers, but still there was no news. Dowager Queen Wang's crying ability did not deteriorate with age. Each mealtime she came to Xuyang and wept for Jiheng exactly on the hour. The entire palace was turned topsy-turvy over the missing princess. Past noon that day, just as Xuyang ordered for the one-winged snow lion to be brought to him so he could ride out to Mount Baishui, Donghua in his purple robe suddenly appeared in front of Danling Gong, carrying an unconscious Jiheng in his arms.

Few from the Demon clan thought they would ever get to meet the world's legendary former sovereign, and thus, that day remained vividly clear in their memory even till now. The entire sky was overcast under gray clouds. Rain started to lessen, and eventually there remained only a light sprinkle. The ten-mile-long expanse in front of the palace gate was blanketed under a carpet of red lotuses, their radiance emanating to every corner. A handsome silver-haired gentleman majestically rode off the cloud and landed on ground. Their dark energy not able to withstand the divine nimbus, the red lotuses slowly closed their petals, leaving a wide path of green pasture for his holy feet to step forward. Jiheng with her eyes closed shut was held in Donghua's arms. Her loosen long hair flowed down like a black waterfall around her pale face. She was extremely weak. Her two arms circled around his neck. Her body was covered underneath his robe, showing only her bare ivory ankles... on them were ominous drops of scarlet blood.

What happened those two nights on Mount Baishui, no one in this world besides Donghua, Jiheng, and perhaps the unlucky water serpent really knew. What was known, was that Donghua stayed another day in Danling Palace until Jiheng regained consciousness. After waking up, she attached herself to Donghua like a chick to her mother hen. Not once did she

mention Minsu. Xuyang was glad to find that his decision to send Minsu to Mount Baishui turned out to be a wise decision. Although his younger sister was put into danger, she was given an opportunity to fall in love with Donghua. It was a brilliant move on the chessboard if he may say so himself. On the third day as Donghua was preparing to leave Danling Palace, Xuyang invited him over for tea. After one round of tea, Xuyang proposed to send Jiheng to Taichen Palace three days later, forever tying the two clans in alliance. Donghua agreed.

At this point in the story, Yan Chiwu sighed and began to mutter. He was muttering that if he wasn't so severely injured, he would have prevented Jiheng from going to Mount Baishui; if that had been the case, Donghua wouldn't be a part of this story, and he and Jiheng would've been married; the heavens were momentarily blinded, so on and so forth.

The leaf Fengjiu wore on her head had started to shrivel due to the heat. Underneath, she tiredly asked Yan Chiwu, "How do you know for certain Donghua loved Jiheng? What if there's something he couldn't say?"

Xiao Yan clenched his fists. His knuckles cracked as he snarled, "He wouldn't dare!" With the same furor he continued, "Jiheng is pure and chaste; she's elegant and noble; fish forget to swim, birds forget to fly at the sight of her; the moon is dim, the flowers humbled next to her; she's simply too beautiful for words²⁵. What is so difficult for a man to love her?" He snarled again, showing his even white teeth. "He does not deserve being called a man!"

Yan Chiwu was an uncouth fellow, yet he managed to say five idioms in a row, surprising Fengjiu greatly. At the same time, she wanted to refute on

²⁵ 冰清玉潔 (pure as ice and chaste as jade)

蕙質蘭心 (essence and heart of orchids)

沉魚落雁 (sink fish and alight birds)

閉月羞花 (outshine the moon and put flowers to shame)

美不勝收 (too beautiful for descriptions)

the fact that his heart was only occupied with Jiheng, but she stopped herself. She quietly rearranged the shriveled up leaf above her head.

Noticing Fengjiu's doubtful expression, Yan Chiwu sighed, "I know what you're thinking. Girls like to think they're the only one worthy of the ones they admire, the rest are but meaningless trifles." Xiao Yan was sincere. "You don't think Ice Face likes Jiheng, this I can understand, because I also used to think Jiheng didn't like Ice Face." He sighed morosely again. "But they were alone together for two nights. Just think! Oy, even I don't want to think about it. Yet the truth remains that there have been so many couples who started out hating each other and still ended up falling for one another once they're trapped together in close proximity." The despondent fellow sighed and sighed again. "Let's step back and think, if Ice Face didn't truly love Jiheng, why did he agree to marry her? If he didn't want to, who from your Heaven clan can really force him?"

Fengjiu thought Xiao Yan's words made sense. She sadly adjusted the leaf on her head and, after a while, tilted her face to ask Yan Chiwu: "But I know," she coughed, "I heard when they parted ways at the Lotus Sphere, Jiheng asked Donghua to let her have the fox they found there. Didn't Donghua refuse? If he had liked Jiheng, why would he be so petty? This..."

Yan Chiwu interrupted her, "What do you know, it was a trick!"

He then explained to her, "If you like Ice Face, you'd want to see him again. Then let me ask you, what's the best way to do that?" Not waiting for her reply, Xiao Yan said with conviction, "Borrowing books! You borrow, you meet him once. You return, you meet him again. Borrow, return, borrow, return. Eventually it becomes natural. Once it becomes natural, everything else is cake. It was for the same reason Donghua didn't let Jiheng have the fox. Think about it, if Jiheng loved that fox, wouldn't she come to visit it often, thereby giving him countless chances?" He furrowed his brow and let out a long sigh, "Ice Face is extremely cunning!"

Fengjiu thought about it and, in dismay, once more found that Yan Chiwu was right. Although she didn't see it back then, the truth was that after

Jiheng entered Taichen Palace, Donghua indeed started to treat her differently. She didn't know then they had shared a bond at Mount Baishui. Everything she knew about the two of them was confined to events on Mount Fuyu, and she discovered nothing unusual from their daily interactions. It turned out she had just neglected to think about the hidden intricacies of the story.

Three hundred years ago, the Jiheng who stayed at Taichen Palace was a studious princess. Fengjiu still remembered. While leaning against Donghua's feet as he fished by the Pundarika Pond, she often saw Jiheng run to Donghua with an old discolored book in her hand to ask for his explanation on certain passages. Donghua happily helped each time. From what she saw, on no occasion did the two overstep their boundaries. But Jiheng's studiousness especially helped her along. After being through with annotating the sutras, he sometimes let Jiheng borrow them first before returning them to the reverent Buddha of the Western Heavens. He had undeniably indulged Jiheng regarding this point.

On a lazy summer day in July, Lord Liansong of Wuji Palace brought a small roll of parchment and came looking for Donghua. After going round-about, he finally admitted that Cheng'yu Yuanjun's birthday was coming up. She had been collecting daggers these days so he drafted up a new design and wanted Donghua to help him make it so that he may present Cheng'yu Yuanjun with a one-of-a-kind saber for her birthday.

The unique thing about this saber was that in a close-distance duel, it would act as a short dagger, but in a far-distance battle, it would turn into a long sword. And when overpowered by the opponent, it would have concealed weapons such as hidden poisonous needles. When going hunting, it could change into a bow, in the kitchen, a vegetable knife. In short, carrying this saber was the same as carrying five weapons at once: a dagger, a sword, hidden weapons, a bow, and a knife. It was going to be so useful, she'd carry it with her at all times. Liansong also didn't want to create this special saber from magic. He wanted to hand-craft the piece so that it would show how genuine his feelings were for Cheng'yu Yuanjun.

The problem was that the third prince mainly created mighty weapons to subdue demons such as bells or pagodas, so there was some difficulty for him in making such an intricate dagger. After much thought, he decided that for such a weird object, he would need the weirdo's help.

With one hop, Fengjiu leapt onto the desk from Donghua's lap. She hopped around on the large blueprint and discovered the design was very masterful. But there were a few rough spots which would leave edges when assembled. They would cause the reputation of Donghua's impeccable craftsmanship to be affected. Although Prince Liansong was famous for his smooth ways with the ladies, such fine details were hard for him to detect. Her heart drummed in excitement. She could finally show her ability to him. If she could fix this sketch, Donghua would recognize that her talents were no less than Jiheng's. At the thought of this, she discreetly placed her paw on the flawed spot lest Liansong catch it himself.

But she was unnecessarily worried; the prince was busy convincing Donghua to help him. "You've always been interested in ceramics, haven't you? I found a ceramics town in Xuanming's territory in the North. It has the best clay to make ceramics, but Xuanming guards it very tightly. If you help me make this saber, I'll draw up a map of that place with the precious clay for you. Xuanming won't dare decline if you're the one to ask."

Donghua unhurriedly poured more tea into his cup. "How about I bring to you the materials and you can make it yourself?"

"It's not as though you don't know Xuanming and I don't get along with each other," Liansong sighed. "I visited his estate one year for a small feast and his young wife somehow took a fancy to me. She wrote love letters to me every day. Xuanming still wouldn't let that go."

Donghua carelessly placed the teapot back on the table. "I've never liked owing others anything. I don't like coercing anyone either." He stroked Fengjiu's smooth fur and continued, "In coming days, trade all the ceramics in your palace for metals and gems. Then spread a rumor that you're allergic to ceramics. The finer the quality, the more allergic you are."

I'm certain Xuanming will give you his best porcelains for your birthday this year. Then you can transfer them to me."

Liansong gaped at him for a long time.

Donghua took a sip of tea and looked up, "Is there a problem?"

The third prince forced a smile and shook his head, "No, no problem at all."

By the time Liansong left it was near high noon. Donghua poured some tea and brought it to Fengjiu. She docilely took two sips. Donghua always gave her good food, good drinks. If she was a pet, then he was a good master. Seeing that she was lying still next to the drawing, he asked, "I'm picking materials to make the saber. Do you want to come?" She decisively shook her head and even flopped onto the drawing sleepily. He caressed her head and stepped out alone.

As soon as Donghua stepped out the doors, Fengjiu immediately started to act. She had learned how to use her paws to perform some difficult movements. She rolled the drawing up with her head and claws and used her mouth to toss it onto her back. Then she snuck out of Taichen Palace over to Siming Xingjun's residence, taking care to avoid the young fairies playing by the flower beds.

Siming and she lived up to their long-time friendship. From a few gestures, Siming was able to tell what she wanted to do. He took the paper roll from her back and with a few brush strokes corrected the flaws according to her direction. As they were about to roll the drawing up, Cheng'yu Yuanjun arrived for a visit call. She curiously took a look and lamented, "Which crazy person drew up such a weird toy?!" Fengjiu looked to the far distance with sympathy in her eyes and felt for His Highness, the third prince.

When Fengjiu laboriously brought the blueprint back to the study, Donghua still hadn't returned. She agilely climbed up the desk, pushed the rolled plot off her back, and unrolled the piece of paper. She wondered how to let Donghua know from paw gestures that there were some flaws

with the design, that she asked a friend to fix them according to her directions, and whether he was happy with the changes. At this moment, two knocks sounded at the door. After a short pause, the door creaked open. Jiheng's pretty head poked in. Seeing Fengjiu on the study desk, the happy princess quickly came in. On her hand was a Buddhist sutra. It was the first time Fengjiu met a member of the Demon clan who was so entranced with Buddha's teachings.

Jiheng searched far and wide, then came back to stroke Fengjiu's head. She smiled and asked, "Is Dijun not here?"

She turned her head to avoid Jiheng's caress, then jumped to the chair next to the study. Jiheng seemed to be in a good mood today; she didn't mind Fengjiu's unfriendly action. She hummed a cheerful tune and took a brush from the brush stand. Then she looked to Fengjiu as if asking for her opinion. "There's an especially difficult passage I didn't understand today. But Dijun's whereabouts are often unpredictable. Do you think I can leave a note for him?" Fengjiu turned her head and ignored the princess.

Jiheng had only dipped the brush into the ink – the brush end still hadn't touched the paper she found on the desk, when the door suddenly opened. The person standing at the door against the sunlight was the very owner of this study, Donghua Dijun. In his hand was a piece of shiny black sheet-metal. Paying no attention to the other presences in the room, he headed straight for his desk. At last he glanced over to Jiheng who was hovering a brush over the drawing on the desktop.

He held the drawing up and studied it; Fengjiu's heart threatened to leap out of her throat. Donghua said to Jiheng, "Did you add these two changes? They're very good." In his voice was an admiration he rarely let shown. "I thought you only read books. I didn't know you knew these things too." It was rare to find someone who understood weaponry, much less a female, thus he generously added, "It's difficult enough to understand Liansong's drawing. But you found two flaws on top of that. Your brother was right when he said you were knowledgeable." Jiheng's

expression was of a dubious nature, but she was nonetheless pleased and leaned in closer to see the drawing.

Fengjiu watched speechlessly as Jiheng leaned closer in yet Donghua didn't try to move away. Instead, he casually handed Jiheng the drawing and told her, "Since you understand this, and seem to have an interest in it, why don't you come with me tomorrow when I start forging the saber?"

Although Jiheng didn't understand the first part, she quite understood the second. She happily agreed. "It's my honor to be able to work with Your Majesty and learn new things from you." Then she started to show signs of worry. "But I'm rather clumsy. I'm afraid I might inconvenience you."

Donghua took another look at the drawing and handed it to the princess. There was still an evident hint of admiration in his voice. "As long as your mind isn't clumsy."

Fengjiu watched in conflicting feelings and anger. Not able to stop herself, she leapt out to take a bite on Jiheng's hand. Jiheng cried out in surprise. At the same time, Donghua grabbed the scary Fengjiu who was still baring her teeth. He frowned and dropped his tone, "Why did you bite her without reason? And she's your savior, too." She wanted to say it wasn't her fault. It was Jiheng's for lying. The person who corrected the drawing was she, not Jiheng. But she couldn't utter one word. Donghua lifted her to face him squarely. It was something one would do to a pet; they'd never been equals. Suddenly Fengjiu felt dismal. She thrashed out of his hold and sprinted out of the room. As soon as she left tears started to fall. Carelessly, she fell over the door threshold. When she turned her head and looked through smeared eyes, she could only see Donghua checking Jiheng's wound. He paid no attention to this bullied fox at all. She didn't even bite very hard. She would never behave so atrociously even if she was angry. Jiheng was probably over-sensitive. Had she known, she would've bitten a bit more lightly. As her chagrin dissolved, sorrow took over her heart. A fox's anguish was still anguish, was it not?

Fengjiu felt that Donghua's action clearly showed he was taking Jiheng's side. In a dispute, he chose to help Jiheng instead of her. He even scolded her first before finding out the truth. Feeling miffed, she retreated her head and curled herself into the flower bush.

She was going to pick a farther spot, but she had hoped that Donghua would be smart enough to realize he had blamed her wrongly and look for her to apologize. What if he couldn't find her because she had sat too far away? It'd be best if she sat closer in. She dejectedly circled the entire Taichen Palace and gloomily chose the Sumo bush right in front of Donghua's bedchamber. To lie more comfortably, she quietly went to the stream nearby and collected some Jixiang grass to make herself a bed. Sad and exhausted, she curled up in the nest and yawned. After fighting sleep awhile, her eyelids slowly drooped and eventually closed.

When Fengjiu woke up, the Sumo blossoms above her head were rustling in the wind. She dazedly poked her head out and found the sky littered with stars. It was so bright she could see the dusts in the cloud nearby. The Bodhi leaves in the yonder background gave out a throbbing faint green glow against the silent night like enlarged fireflies landing quietly on the palace wall. She sprinted out to see if Donghua had returned. When she looked up, his bedchamber a few paces away was indeed lit inside. She again wondered if Donghua ever went to look for her. She hopped on the steps and stood on her toes to look inside through ajar doors. With one look, she was paralyzed on that doorway.

When she was stargazing just now, the South Star had moved to the 24th sky. From the little she knew about astronomy, it meant it was now past the hour of the pig (past 11pm). Even so, Donghua didn't seem sleepy yet as he was holding a brush at this time looking as if he was preparing to paint something, a room divider perhaps. But why was Jiheng in his bedchamber? Fengjiu latched herself to the doorway confoundedly, not knowing what was going on.

On the glass ceiling beam hung a chandelier which illuminated the entire room as bright as daytime. Within walking distance, a purple-robed man

stood in front of an empty virginal canvas while a white-robed woman sat by the desk busying herself with a painting. From afar, they made a picture-perfect mural, one which would have been painted by her own father – the most talented artist of all realms.

The chandelier flickered at the entering of a breeze. It should really be exchanged for night pearls – they're bright, natural, and much more stable. But then again, Donghua seemed to favor this dark-light ambiguity these past few years.

In that silent scenery, Jiheng all of sudden rested her brush and tilted her head up to say to Donghua: "This place where the sword closes into a box which holds a tube of hidden needles... of course the Third Prince's drawing is perfect, I just have a difficult time understanding what this detail means. Dijun..." As she spoke, she saw Donghua flourishing his brush over the white silk canvas, lost to everything else. Fuling flowers appeared beneath the bristles, trimming the border of the screen. They were delicate and lifelike, and looked as if they were moving in the wind. The princess paused, then softly changed her way of address: "...Teacher..." Although her voice was smaller than a mosquito's, Donghua heard her nevertheless. He stopped and turned to look at her. Without opposing the new address, he spoke a mere two words: "Go ahead."

Fengjiu's sight had always been sharp. Even with the unsteady light-source, and even at this distance, she still noticed the blush emanating from Jiheng's cheeks when she lowered her head. Jiheng brought her eyes down to the shiny reflective floor. "What I meant is, can you stop for just a moment to help me..."

Fengjiu was glad to see how clumsy Jiheng was. But her happiness hadn't time to spread when she at once became saddened. She was happy because the thing that troubled Jiheng was extremely simple to her; that meant she was smarter than the princess. And she was sad because this was the only thing she was better at compared to Jiheng, but even this one credit was stolen. She secretly hoped Jiheng couldn't do even something as

simple as this. How would Donghua mock her with that personality of his? She waited anxiously for the proceeding episode.

Unlike what she was hoping for, Donghua didn't say a thing. He only received the brush from Jiheng's hand and bent down to draw two lines on the blueprint. Then he gently explained, "This is a metal catch. Pushing on it will pull the sword back. Liansong drew it too roughly." After the short explanation, he raised his head to look at Jiheng again. "Understand now?" He seemed patient enough to explain further should she need it.

Fengjiu unconsciously gaped. Occasionally when she was being dim, or when Zhonglin did something not to Donghua's liking, he always teased them and bruised their egos as though it was his second nature. But he didn't hurt Jiheng's pride; he was so gentle with her.

Under the flickering light, when a blushing Jiheng nodded her head, Donghua rested the brush on the ink well and looked at her. "Liansong also drew very roughly those other two spots," he remarked. "Didn't you fix those very well, in fact? This one isn't as difficult as those other ones."

Flustered, Jiheng's rosy cheeks faded some. She replied after a while, "...those two spots," she paused, "are lucky guesses." She smiled hesitantly. "I've only read books on my own before, so I only know trivial things. I'm learning so much more from following you now, Teacher." The rosy color again returned to her countenance, taking over the ashen paleness. In the stillness, Jiheng's eyes came to rest on Donghua's divider screen and they suddenly sparkled. She softly said, "It's late, but... I want to finish the drawing tonight so you can start on your work. If I finish tonight, may I have this room divider as a reward?"

Donghua seemed a trifle surprised, but agreeably accepted in the end with a simple word: "Yes." At that same moment the bristles touched the stretched white fabric. In a few simple sweeps, a shan-shui landscape emerged with mountain summits behind foggy veil. Jiheng laid down the brush in her hand and came over to appreciate his brush strokes. Not able to resist her sleepiness, she covered her mouth and yawned several times.

Without pausing from his painting, he told her, "Go back and rest. You can finish tomorrow."

"But that will affect your schedule," said Jiheng, covering her yawns. She glanced at the divider screen and shyly continued: "I was going to finish my task so that I can take the screen with me..."

Donghua dipped the wolf-fur brush into the water container exchanging it for a smaller goat-fur brush. "What's one day's time? When I finished with this screen I'll have Zhonglin bring to it you."

Even till now, Fengjiu didn't know how she left Donghua's bedchamber that night. Many people choose to forget the things related to the events which had traumatized them. She guessed she was one of these people. She only remembered she might have returned to her nest and stargazed a while more. In her empty head, she still entertained the question of whether Donghua came to look for her or not. Then she thought to herself, so it turned out Donghua was able to say yes if one would just ask. But how come he'd never done so for her?

Fengjiu used to daydream about the day she would meet Donghua in her human form, or even the day when he would come to like her. How would they spend their days together? But after seeing him with Jiheng tonight, even if such a day came – when Donghua met her, she thought, it would be just that. Jiheng came to Taichen Palace as Donghua's bride, to be the one staying by his side. It was Fengjiu who refused to look at truth in the eye.

Would she and Donghua ever have that day – for the first time she realized such thing might have been nothing more than a futile dream. Coming to this distant and strange place called Jiuchongtian, making that many sacrifices... they weren't to get this sort of ending. She came with sky-high hopes, but now what was she going to do, what was going to be her next step – she had no idea. She only felt tired and exhausted in the chilly night wind. She gazed up to the stars on the sky. It was the first time in four hundred years Fengjiu missed her home. She missed the Qingqiu that was far away; she missed the family she had left behind.

The night was beautiful... but how come she was feeling so devastated?

Donghua didn't come look for her that night, nor the nights after. He used to take her everywhere with him. Was it because he was so lonely, she quietly thought, that he needed to have something, anything, beside him? No matter what it was? Now he had a smart and pretty pupil named Jiheng next to him. Not only could she help him with small errands, she could keep him company by talking to him. He didn't need this little fox anymore.

The more Fengjiu thought about it, the more she was convinced that was how it was, and sadness once again took over her being.

Jiheng and Donghua were inseparable lately. Fengjiu noticed Jiheng had a way of charming Donghua with her words. For example, if Donghua had just finished a fine porcelain wine bottle and was playing with it in his hands, and if she could talk, Fengjiu would say something inane such as 'this bottle is sure to fetch a good sum of money'. But Jiheng was different. She lovingly caressed the slender flagon and smiled gently while telling him: "Teacher, if you use crimson stone powder to fire the clay, perhaps the bottle will retain a pretty sunset color." Although Donghua hadn't made a reply, Fengjiu could tell from his expression that he appreciated her remark.

She crouched against the grass to watch them for a while more. But the more she watched the more irritated she became, so she swung her long tail and rose to find a different playground. When she stood up and wobbled on her sleeping limbs, Jiheng spotted her right away and quickly rushed over with open arms.

Fengjiu had to admire the princess for not holding a grudge. The sight of her own suspending arms finally reminded Jiheng of the bite marks from the previous time. She paused hesitantly. Fengjiu quietly looked up to her and saw that Donghua was also following Jiheng over. But because her limbs were still asleep, she couldn't go anywhere, so she lowered her round eyes to the ground and turned her head woundedly to the side. This pose of hers looked so surprisingly adorable that Jiheng soon forgot her

hesitation and pulled her into an embrace. She caressed the patch of baby fur on top of her head, and, sensing no resistance this time, happily continued to pet the fox.

She didn't know it wasn't because Fengjiu didn't want to resist; she was just too numb to do so. At the same time, Fengjiu recalled when Jiheng had wanted to keep her at the beginning, Donghua's rejection had been so terse and cold. Now he just stood by as if it was amusing to watch even though Jiheng was smothering her like this. His treatment of Jiheng was indeed changing.

Jiheng stroked her fur for a while more before lifting her up and asked, "I thought you had liked me when we were at the Lotus Sphere. You were so sad to see me go, too. Oh, or do you also feel attached to Teacher? But together, both Teacher and I can take care of you now. Shouldn't you be happy then?" Seeing no response, she assuredly carried her to the pottery station where she had been chatting to Donghua. Fengjiu felt her circulation coming back and wanted to get out of her hold, but Jiheng was stronger than she looked; her hold on Fengjiu remained tight. She walked to the stone seat and showed Fengjiu a newly shaped bowl from clay. She happily said to her, "This is the bowl Teacher and I made especially for you. We wanted to etch a design on it, and then we thought, wouldn't it be interesting if it's your own paw-mark?"

Then she took Fengjiu's front paw and planted it onto the bowl.

Fengjiu's ego instantly returned after many days of straying outside. Jiheng's voice was usually like that of a songbird, but for some reason it was prickly today, especially those lines such as: "Teacher and I will take care of you. Teacher and I made you a bowl." Why did she even stay in this form next to Donghua and make so much effort only to achieve the position of a pet. She was truly useless. She was a most beloved goddess in Qingqiu. Although Qingqiu's royalty lacked a lot of decorum in the strict eyes of Jiuchongtian, her dinnerware wasn't any ordinary clay bowl, and she didn't sleep on a nest of hay. Fuming with indignation, Fengjiu turned her paw and gave Jiheng a slash.

The claws were sharp and curvy; she also didn't watch her own strength. Jiheng was holding her so close that the entire paw came into contact with her cheek, leaving behind five long scratches. The two deepest ones were now starting to bleed.

This time Jiheng didn't cry out in pain. She only sat there numbly; her expression was of an incredulous shock. The newly shaped bowl fell from her hand and got squashed on the ground. The blood on her face oozed out more and more each passing second; the two marks already formed two small streams – trickling down and dying her collar a deep red color.

Fengjiu stared uncertainly.

Faintly, she realized that in her recklessness, she had created big trouble.

With one hand, Donghua covered Jiheng's injury using his handkerchief; with his other hand, he grabbed Fengjiu by the nape and lifted her away from Jiheng's lap. Jiheng finally broke away from her stupor and tremblingly took Donghua's sleeve to wipe her tears. "I... I just wanted to befriend her." She then sobbed, "Does she really hate me? I thought... I thought she had liked me before." Donghua frowned as he handed her a handkerchief. Lying low on the ground, Fengjiu stared confoundedly at his action. How sensitive this person was sometimes, she thought. It must hurt him so to see Jiheng's tears flowing over her injured face like this. It must hurt him so, for him to hand her a handkerchief to wipe her tears.

There were hastened footsteps approaching from behind. Fengjiu still didn't bother to see who it was. She only saw Donghua turn around to say: "She's been too unruly lately. Lock her up." It wasn't until Zhonglin bowed reverently in obedience did she understand for whom the word 'unruly' was meant.

When Fengjiu woke from her daze, neither Donghua nor Jiheng remained. There was only the glowing kiln nearby. Zhonglin stood motionlessly a meter away from the kiln. When he saw cognizance return to her eyes, he sighed and waved her over. "Dijun said to lock you up, but he didn't say where and for how long. I couldn't ask what kind of trouble you guys

were causing to have tears and blood strewn everywhere either.” He sighed again, “Come to my room for the time being.”

Whenever she caused trouble before, she would bolt the moment her father raised a cane. If she didn’t want to be locked up, she could still run away. But she didn’t run away; she numbly followed Zhonglin on the flower-lined path, an emptiness invaded her soul. She wanted to catch something, but she didn’t know what it was she wanted to catch. A butterfly glided before her eyes; she raised her forelimb to slap it away. Zhonglin turned around to look and sighed yet again.

Sitting in Zhonglin’s room, Fengjiu’s mood worsened the longer time ticked on. Zhonglin let her know that Princess Jiheng suffered from hemophilia ever since she was small. A small scrape could lead to heavy bleeding let alone such a deep cut. After using Donghua’s best medicines, her condition had now considerably improved.

But Zhonglin didn’t say how long Donghua intended to lock her up, or why he hadn’t visited her. Did he put her out of mind once she was out of sight? Or did he find another fluffy pet and forget about her? Donghua seemed to have many interests: fishing, incense making, pottery... but sometimes she felt he didn’t really care about any of those things, so she couldn’t tell either if any part of his heart had cared about her.

Several days later, Fengjiu found masses of fur clumping together in rings of mold on her body. It seemed Zhonglin couldn’t bear to see her bound up either, so he decided on his own to let her out, at the same time remembering to remind her not to cross paths with Dijun so that he wouldn’t lose his managerial position at Taichen Palace. Fengjiu nodded her head as a promise and listlessly stepped out into the sun to sunbathe her fading fur.

She couldn’t go to any of the places Donghua liked to frequent. Without knowing where she was heading, Fengjiu suddenly heard several idling young servants in conversation. “Whoever loses will have to feed that furry beast today. Anyone who cheats is a turtle!” The young servant nodded reluctantly, “Fine, anyone who cheats is a turtle.” Then he

whispered curiously, "That one-winged snow lion is so scary yet the Red Demon Lord sent it to Princess Jiheng to ride. Do you think the kind and gentle princess can ride such a frightening beast?" The other young servant replied with a knowledgeable air, "Who knows? But Dijun was especially pleased when the beast was brought into the palace."

Fengjiu had heard Zheyang once say that Donghua liked shiny furry animals. They also needed to appear mighty on top of that. In her empty head, she interpreted the servants' words into the following: Donghua had found another pet he liked better. She didn't even have the right to be his pet anymore.

Four hundred years. She had done whatever that could've have been done. If this was still the result, didn't it mean Donghua and she were never fated to begin with?

Fengjiu dazedly followed along the bank of the blue stream. Soon she saw a row of wooden fence barricading her path. She crawled underneath the small opening and continued along the stream. She abruptly stopped after just several steps.

She hid herself behind an ancient apricot tree by the side of the road and hesitated. After a while, she poked her messy head out to look. Standing in the distance was a white lion with only one wing who had arrived at a time unknown to her.

And the person standing in front of that unique lion? Donghua whom she hadn't seen in several days.

Several rainbow clouds floated above the forest. It was a sign of gathered felicity. She leaned behind the tree to sneak a peek at Donghua. He stood next to a flower bush, as straight and beautiful as a sculpted statue. She was miffed, but she missed him. But at the same time she didn't dare to show herself. He was still angry about Jiheng's injury. She felt that she was the more pitiable of the two, but since she was the one chasing after Donghua, she had to be the one to back down – she had long known this.

Next to Donghua was an open trunk. A few snow mushrooms poked out from inside. Fengjiu knew the snow lion was a special beast who only ate mushrooms. But Donghua didn't have to feed him ones of the best grade – even she didn't get to taste these mushrooms yet! He bent down and picked one up. Like lightning, the snow lion who stood several paces away leapt forward and devoured the mushroom from his hand. It was gone in the blink of an eye and the beast burped satisfyingly. Fengjiu turned around in annoyance. From the corner of her eyes, she saw the shameless snow lion nudging its head in Donghua's palm. That act was her special privilege; she fisted her hand mentally. Donghua paused a little before stroking its smooth snowy white fur as he had done to her whenever she was being coquettish with him.

Fengjiu felt that she had been lapsing into longer and longer trances these days. This time when she woke from her trance, both Donghua and the snow lion had disappeared. She wiped her eyes and still there were only the rainbow clouds in front of her. She was debating yet whether it was all a dream when she heard a low taunting voice, "Hey, are you the pet Dijun used to like?"

Fengjiu thought the words 'used to' were rather prickly. But she was too depressed to care. She had barely turned toward the direction of the voice when her mind jolted awake. Standing behind her asking that question was the very same one-winged snow lion. It stood quite far from her, but even at that distance, its colossal body blocked away a large patch of sun above her head, pushing her into the shadows of the apricot tree.

The snow lion stared down at her with profound interest. With the same taunting voice, it spoke: "I keep hearing from the servants how much Dijun used to like you. I thought you must have been a special fox." It snorted. "...But it turns out *this* – is you."

Fengjiu's ego was bruised. She looked down at herself and saw that her fur was indeed shaggy. Then she looked back at the snow lion to see that his fur was brushed smooth and clean. Had she gotten into the situation of

being compared to a real pet? Feeling utterly pathetic, she turned around to leave.

The snow lion leapt like a whirlwind and barricaded her way. It raised its foot to push her down. "Leaving so quickly?" Fengjiu almost got knocked over by the push. She glared back at the immense and unreasonable body stopping her way but she forgot that she was only a fox in this moment. This angry look was perhaps mighty on a human's face but its effectiveness on a fox's face was rather limited.

The snow lion squinted his eyes and pushed her again. "What? Are you displeased?" Seeing her crawling back up, he pushed one foot down on her chest and pinned her to the ground. He stared down at her tauntingly from above. "I also heard because Dijun liked you, you became so spoiled that you dared injure my mistress Jiheng." With another foot, he pressed down on Fengjiu's two tiny flailing limbs. He said with satisfaction, "My young princess doesn't mind because she is generous. But I'm not generous like her. Consider it bad luck that you see me today."

Fengjiu couldn't hear what the lion was saying after that. Pain shot out from her front limb as her face stung hot when a sharp object poked into her cheek and slashed across it. Pain immediately spread through her entire face. She painfully screamed. But like a fish with an open mouth, she could make no sound.

The snow lion unhurriedly raised his blood-stained claws; drop after drop fell down on Fengjiu's eyelid. She gasped for breath as her eyes dilated. Her sight was covered in blots of red. The clouds at the end of the sky, the white Fuling flowers in the distance, all were dyed in a deep red color. The beautiful lion from before was now wearing a coat of red fur. With a surprised expression, he smiled devilishly: "You really are mute like they say."

Fengjiu had heard before about the strength of the one-winged lions. Numerous immortals from Jiuchongtian, old and young, had tried to capture one to tame into their riding animal. Only Tianjun's youngest prince captured one in recent years, and he gifted it to his nephew, Lord

Yehua. But Lord Yehua wasn't much interested in rare riding animals. He negligently left the coveted beast in Tianjun's hunting grounds. Fengjiu knew her own strength. Although she was originally a fox, all her magic was practiced under her human form. Many of the powerful spells needed to be conjured using fingers. In her current shape, their strengths were too different, and it was unwise to take him on.

The snow lion patted her injury-laden face with his claws. Fengjiu wasn't able to cry to lessen her pain. She wondered if Jiheng was feeling the same pain that time. Probably not. Her strike wasn't intentional, and her claws much smaller. They would never be as sharp and ruthless as this lion's.

The lion seemed to be greatly amused. Like a cat playing with a terrified mouse under its paws, he again slapped on her right bloody cheek. "Are you still hoping that Dijun will come here to save you? Did you gain his sympathy with this same pitiful look back then? But take a look, now that there's a rare animal like myself here, why would Dijun still like you? His Majesty and the princess come to visit me every day ever since I arrived here, but they never mentioned the mutt that is you once. I heard the maidservants say the King had you locked up for a long time now..." It broke out laughing. "Ah, from what I know, Dijun didn't say to free you. How did you come out here?"

Fengjiu knew this sort of vicious beasts liked to have other animals submit to it. The greater she put up a resistance, the more it'd torture her. With its eccentric temperament, it was possible that it would torture her until she died. There was a saying: death can be as light as a goose feather, or as weighty as the Tai Mountain. If a Bai descendant were to die here today in such fashion, she wouldn't even have the right to an ancestral tablet in Qingqiu.

Fengjiu lay on the wild field with faint gasps of breath. She didn't understand why, as a goddess, she had run all this way to Jiuchongtian and got herself into this situation. Jiheng had Donghua to protect her and a loyal snow lion to avenge her. But her own loved ones from Qingqiu knew nothing of her suffering.

The lion slapped her around a while more, then getting no response, lost his interest as expected. He scoffed, used his claw to lift away the trinket on her neck and airily walked away. That trinket was a piece of white jade Donghua put on her the day he brought her back to Jiuchongtian. It went well with the color of her fur, and she had liked it very much, never letting anyone touch it. Not only did the lion touch the jade, he even stole it away. Yet she couldn't do anything about it. She could only endure the misery silently. She looked to the floating clouds on the sky. Her eyes started to burn and hot tears flowed down from their corners. Love – chasing love was this painful?

Fengjiu lay on the grass for a long time. The pain tore from her wound and sucked away all her energy. She could only hope someone would pass by to take her home and give her some pain-reliever. But the sun was now gradually shifting to the west; it was going to be dark soon. She then remembered, this was a deserted field, who would be so leisure as to pass by?

The night sky turned darker by the minutes, the air turned chillier by the seconds. Fengjiu's body altered from feverish to cold. Her once lucid mind weighed heavily. Although her limbs had become numbed, the numbness helped alleviate the pain and she was able to crawl a little faster. It was still hard to get out of this woods before it'd turn completely dark and she could ask to be sheltered in someone's home. It was very likely she would die here tonight. The more she worried, the less she paid attention to directions. She couldn't tell where she was crawling to anymore – her head now sluggishly torpid. Out of nowhere she fell over in a splash. She flailed about frantically and choked on some mouthfuls of water. Then a sudden taste of blood flooded her mouth, her eyes darkened, and she fell into unconsciousness.

According to Siming, he had just finished his supper that day. After brushing his teeth, he went to brew a pot of tea gifted to him by a certain fairy from the Lower Realm. Taking advantage of the clear moonlit night,

he thought of bringing a chair out to the lotus pond to cast a line. One took his bait the moment he threw it down and the line was heavy when he tugged on it. He was excited at the thought that he might have caught a one-in-a-lifetime catch but when he reeled it in, on the hook was a small dying fox. This small fox was, of course, Fengjiu.

Fengjiu stayed at Siming's estate for three straight days. He had had to go to his colleagues and used up all his favors asking for medicines in order to treat her. There were topical treatments and there were comestible ones. Remembering that Fengjiu had always been afraid of bitterness, Siming consistently added honey into the elixirs so she could easily take them. Thanks to the magical medicines, Fengjiu's injuries healed quickly. After three or four days she was able to step down from her bed. Holding the Book of Fates in his hands, Siming repeated the question he had asked her countless times before: "Your Highness, I genuinely want to know. For such a powerful goddess, what did you do to yourself to fall into this wretched state?"

But her mood was foul these days, so she didn't care to reply.

There were days when Fengjiu wrapped herself in a blanket, lost in thoughts. Clouds drifted outside the windowpanes; fairy cranes sang their graceful hymns. But her mind was in a tangle. This love of hers which had lasted for more than two thousand years – was it finally time to let it go?

She really was at her utmost end. More than four hundred years ago when Siming was but a menial official whose job was to select helpers for the many palaces on Heaven, she had asked him to bring her into Taichen Palace as a maidservant so she could be near Donghua. Afraid her parents would find out their daughter had lowered herself to become a maid on Jiuchongtian, she pleaded to Zheyang for him to take away the phoenix mark on her forehead. When she left, Zheyang even encouraged her: "Princess Fengjiu is so pretty and clever, and even knows how to cook. Even if cold Donghua can resist your beauty and kindness, he won't be able to resist your cooking. Don't worry about anything, your Uncle Bai Zhen and I will be here to back you up." She rode away on clouds with the

highest of hopes. But days turned into months and months into years, and still Donghua paid her no attention despite living in the same palace. That meant she should've taken into account the (lack of) fate at play. If they were fated at all, they would've been like the gentlemen and ladies in those screenplays Auntie Bai Qian kept. Even if they had lived skies apart, one on the 36th level of Heaven and the other on the 18th level of Hell, the sky would've split to allow the gentleman to fall precisely where his lady was. It wouldn't be as difficult as her and Donghua's situation.

When she became a little fox, she was finally able to near Donghua. She could've asked for her fur back from Nie Chuyin before their contracted time was up with the help of either her Uncle Bai Zhen or Zheyang, but Donghua seemed to like the little fox so much. He had always turned a cold eye to the ladies - she witnessed it herself. She knew she wasn't any more special than those other goddesses and fairies. If she went back to her human form, Donghua might very well push her away too, and then those four hundred years would have gone to waste. Of course, she couldn't stay being his pet forever. She would have to tell him eventually that she was Fengjiu, the young goddess from Qingqiu. But she wanted to wait, wait until they're a bit closer... and closer still. Unfortunately, that day never came. Out of the blue, Jiheng showed up in Taichen Palace. Perhaps this was another example of how ill-fated she and Donghua were.

At this moment, Siming came to give her medicine as usual.

From the day she fell into this misery, Siming began to wear a perpetual odd scowl. Sometimes it was marked with a certain sympathy, sometimes anger, sometimes irritability. Today, as if he was put under a spell, he changed his attitude and started to tease her. His handsome face was one that was even sterner than her own father's. His beautiful long eyes which were always twinkling with jest were now gloomy.

Fengjiu couldn't help giving him two glares, and, shuddering, crawled under the blanket.

Siming transferred the medicine into a small golden mortar and pulverized it with a pestle. He then took out a spoonful, added some sugar, and brought it to her mouth.

Fengjiu stared at him questioningly.

Siming silently looked back at her. "This medicine can't be mixed with water, you have to swallow it dry. Wait an hour before drinking any water." Then he took some tangerines from the plate bedside, peeled them, and gave a piece to her. "If it's bitter, take some tangerine with it."

Fengjiu raised her paw to receive the tangerine. Lowering her head to lick her medicine, she heard Siming sigh as he softened his voice: "I had some time today so I went to the 13th sky and asked around about you. They said you injured the princess of the South land so Donghua locked you up? Your injuries weren't caused by her retaliation, were they?"

Fengjiu paused from licking her medicine. She softly shook her head.

Siming then said, "Two days from now is Donghua's wedding, supposedly to the Demon princess who was injured by you. What do you plan to do?"

Fengjiu dazedly stared at the tangerine wedge in her paw. She knew they were going to get married, but she didn't think it would be so soon. She lifted her head to look numbly at Siming. The things she wanted to ask hadn't started to show in her eyes when Siming caught on. "No one was looking for you; it seems they don't know you are missing."

Fengjiu lowered her head and continued her task of picking at the tangerine's veins.

Siming suddenly raised his hand and touched her forehead. His action was somewhat crossing decorum, but his hand was warm on her cold forehead. With tear-filled eyes, she looked at him in bewilderment. She felt his hand gently caressing her head as if to give her some comfort. After which he asked, "Do you want to go back to Qingqiu?"

She nodded.

He asked, "You're giving up on this love that you've chased for more than two thousand years, Your Highness?"

Again, she nodded.

He asked, "Do you want to see him one last time?"

Yet again, she nodded.

Each of Siming's questions felt like one from her own self, as though there existed two of her – one strong and one weak. The stronger self was forcing the weaker to come to an ultimatum for that love story. It hadn't been easy for her to persevere to this day. She was able to hang on until now only because there hadn't been anyone else next to Donghua's side. Her love for him had been of a beautiful, steadfast kind. But he was intended for matrimony soon, becoming someone else's husband. Were she to cling onto her one-sided feelings, she'd be turning something beautiful into a resentful insistence. A Qingqiu girl could never demean herself like that. She was young, and could afford to be foolish, but things had come to a point where she shouldn't keep digging her heels in. Otherwise, life might become even more miserable – and she had a lifetime ahead of her, why should she subject herself to prolonged misery?

She carefully split the tangerine and handed Siming half of it. Her pupils were now clear within her tear-free eyes. Siming took the tangerine from her and, after a long while, softly said, "Alright. When you're a bit better tomorrow, I'll take you to go see that person."

In Fengjiu's memory, her meeting with Donghua happened on a breezy day. Well, she didn't really meet him. Siming carried her in his arms and together they snuck into Taichen Palace using an invisible spell so that she could watch Donghua from afar for one last time.

It was at a small garden Donghua often visited. Lush green leaves adorned boundless multicolor lotuses inside the pond. On the water surface was the hexagonal pavilion constructed from white sandalwood that was made

especially for her to keep cool. But at this time, the ones sitting inside were Princess Jiheng and her one-winged snow lion.

A gold brocade parchment was laid on the crystal tabletop. With a brush in her hand, Jiheng was transcribing something. The snow lion knelt docilely by her feet two steps away. Pain instantly resonated throughout Fengjiu's body like a reflex.

After quickly finishing one page, Jiheng beckoned the lion close. That ferocious beast turned out to be very obedient; he quietly waited for his mistress to spread the sheet of Xuanzhi parchment on his back for the ink to dry. Then, he nudged his head lovingly against her hand. Feeling ticklish, Jiheng turned and giggled to Donghua who was sitting outside by the lotus pond and playing with a short dagger in his hand. "It seems Suoying is hungry again. The snow mushrooms are with Teacher. It's not his meal time yet, but can't we feed him just one?"

Fengjiu made a mental note of the snow lion's name – so it was called Suoying. Next to Donghua's feet was indeed a wooden chest full of smooth and shiny mushrooms.

Suoying was a well-behaved pet. Hearing Jiheng's words, he did not immediately lunge before Donghua like last time. He stretched his back to keep the piece of paper balanced and gracefully walked down each step of the pavilion. Afterward, he slowly ate the mushroom from Donghua's hand while gazing up to look at him with big grateful eyes. Jiheng was pleased with her pet's manner.

Fengjiu sat in Siming's arms to watch the composition before her eyes. Putting aside all petty thoughts, she could objectively see what an excellent and harmonious picture they made: a handsome master, a beautiful mistress, and a beloved pet to the both of them. Even she had to admire such a scene.

Fuling flowers were in season. Like masses of tiny ringing bells, they quivered in the wind and threatened to fall at any moment from the bowed

branches on which they hung. Fengjiu slightly squirmed within Siming's hold. He softly asked her, "Do you want to go back?"

The two were about to leave when out of the blue a bright flash accompanied by the sound of whistling wind flew past them; it drilled into the Fuling trunk nearby. Fengjiu held her breath and stared at the painted picture in the purview ahead. Within the snowy deluge of flying petals, an elegant and regal purple silhouette was placidly striding toward them. She had been with him always, but this was the first time she had a chance to take a close look at this mannerism of his.

Holding her breath yet, she watched him come to the Fuling tree and flake away fallen petals on the sword. Quietly, he held a cut petal up to the pale sunlight and studied it. This must be the dagger Liansong asked him to make for Cheng'yu Yuanjun's birthday, she thought. Donghua might be testing the weight and speed of the sword right now. If the sword was too heavy, its speed would be too slow and the wind speed generated by it would only blow Fuling petals without cutting them. He studied it engrossedly in a way she was only too familiar with. To Fengjiu, this was his most beautiful countenance.

He removed the sword from the tree and again a shower of petals came sprinkling down. The gossamer confetti swirled in the air with each of his movements. Fengjiu held her paw out to catch the scattered petals on her sharp claws. She dazedly stared at the damaged fragments. When she looked up again, the purple silhouette had retreated far away from her field of vision, fading gradually behind the dancing curtain of white Fulings.

They were so close, she thought, and yet he saw her not.

But what had Donghua done wrong? He never knew she was Fengjiu of Qingqiu. He never knew she loved him. He couldn't have known the sacrifices she made and the efforts she put into having him either. They just weren't fated. Love couldn't be achieved from efforts alone. She knew this, and knew they weren't meant to be, but she was still overwhelmed with regrets. Questions and answers filled her mind... they were from the

dialogue between her strong self and her weak self. Siming petted her head and turned around with a sigh. Fengjiu could still hear that dialogue ringing by her ears now.

"Are you sad to say goodbye?"

"What is there to be sad about? We'll surely meet again one day."

"Even if that day comes, you'll never look at him with these feelings again."

"I've already tucked away everything that's important into my memory. Wouldn't it be his loss to lose my love? He should be the one feeling sad."

For some reason, teardrops nevertheless fell from her eyes onto the Fuling petals on her paws. Despite herself, she turned around once more. Through teary eyes, still only scattered petals filled the sky. The boundless landscape was at a standstill with silence. She gazed at the petals in her paws again and again, then curled herself within Siming's arms and faintly fingered a question: "Will everything be alright from now on?" He stopped for what felt like an eternity. His hand again crossed rightful boundaries to soothe her forehead as he replied her, "Yes, Your Highness, everything will be okay."

The following morning was the 13th of September. Astrology deemed it to be a good day for weddings, worship, openings, and sweeping homes. The 13th celestial heaven at long last rejoiced in Donghua Dijun and Princess Jiheng's wedding. The unprecedented grand ceremony previously imagined turned out to be very low-key. There was some festivity outside of Taichen Palace, but there was no movement elsewhere on Heaven. It was just like Donghua's ways of doing things.

Fengjiu was going to leave Jiuchongtian that very night. Before leaving, she asked the cook at Siming's estate to roast a few yams for her. Carrying them on her back, she quietly circled the 13th sky and left the bag in front of Taichen Palace's gates. It was a gift for Donghua's wedding, and also the last tribute to their attachment. She promised to remember the care he had

given her the past few months. Not having anything precious to give, she hoped the yams would reach Donghua. Would he think of this little fox when he saw them? But, if he didn't, then it didn't matter either. The bright moon hung high above. The sound of merry music drifted outside from within the palace. Fengjiu felt a calmness at this time; she was neither happy nor sad. There was only an ineffable feeling slowly drowning her, like the time she accidentally fell into the water after meeting the one-winged snow lion. In the end, she didn't know what this emotion was.

As for Donghua's only romance throughout these thousands of years, Fengjiu had an idea why Yan Chiwu had called it an unfortunate affair. Donghua liked Jiheng, and they were but one step away from their happy ending. Yet at that very last step they turned and parted from one another. On their famous wedding night, the new bride Jiheng all of a sudden went missing. In her place, it was Princess Zhi'he who donned the auspicious red outfit. Moreover, Fengjiu was the one to discover this fact before anybody else. When she brought the roasted yams to Taichen Palace, Zhi'he in the red gown cornered her against a palace wall and prattled on about some nonsensical things. With farcical reasoning, she even fooled Fengjiu into believing that she and Donghua still had a chance at their own happy ending. It had felt fishy, Fengjiu now recalled. But in any event, Donghua was getting married soon. Whether he married Jiheng or Zhi'he made no difference to her. She didn't know if anguish had numbed away the injuries she sustained or not, be it on her body or mind, but her heart strangely did not ache this time.

Fanyin Valley. In the blistering heat accompanied by occasional sounds of the cicadas, Yan Chiwu became more and more charged as he went on: "Although no one really knew why Jiheng went missing on their wedding night, reportedly she had ran away with her bodyguard Minsu." He guffawed again. "Imagine how embarrassing it is for your new bride to run away with another man on your wedding night. That was some crappy luck Ice Face had, wasn't it?"

What a shock. After she left Jiuchongtian that night, she never asked about Donghua again. But while she was befuddled to hear this from Yan Chiwu, his story was somewhat doubtful. From what she saw during her stay at Taichen Palace, Jiheng's sentiments regarding Donghua was those of utter admiration. She didn't seem to have treated Donghua as only a front to hide her feelings for someone else. There must be other mysteries behind the story.

Clouds increasingly pulled in as the sunlight started to retreat. It seemed it would be raining soon. Fengjiu raised her head to gaze skyward. She then glanced over to see Yan Chiwu still chuckling as if he could not stop while she was made gloomy from all these old memories being dug up again. The sight peeved her a great deal, and she couldn't help herself from mocking him: "Even a heroic warrior such as yourself fell in love with Princess Jiheng. She ran away with someone else, did she run away with you? And although she hasn't consummated her marriage with Donghua, the nuptial rites have been performed so on papers they're still husband and wife. That means Donghua is still better than you. What are you happy about?"

Yan Chiwu with an odd expression looked at her. "Nuptial rites? I thought you were relations from his palace? How is it that you don't know this?"

"Know what?" Fengjiu asked confusedly.

Yan Chiwu scratched his head. "Ice Face didn't marry Jiheng. On the day before the wedding he wanted to see his pet baby fox, so he told his housekeeper to bring it to him. Except that was when they discovered it had gone missing."

Fengjiu sprang up suddenly and cut Yan Chiwu's words. "I'm going to check if this fan-shaped boulder can lead us up or down somewhere. It's tiring to be trapped here. Warrior Xiao Yan, you must be tired from talking all this time. I think it's best we start to think of how to save ourselves."

"You're not listening anymore? But it's interesting!" Yan Chiwu called after her. After only a few steps he caught up to her and rambled on again. "Ice Face rushed out to look for that fox and didn't have time to marry Jiheng. What a joke, he even came to my place asking for it. He thought I stole the animal. Do I look like someone who would kidnap foxes? If I was going to kidnap something, it should at least be Heavenly maidens. What an insult. I heard he still hasn't found it after 300 years of searching. If you ask me, that fox is as good as dead. I wonder what was so special about it for him to love it that much."

After mumbling on and on, Xiao Yan looked up to see Fengjiu kneeling by the cliff. The boulder which was lodged between the mountainsides where she was stepping on appeared to be unstable. He quickly warned her: "Be careful!" His high-pitched and sudden call surprised Fengjiu causing her to lose her footing. With two drops of sweat rolling down his temple, Yan Chiwu lurched after her.

Second Half – Fanyin Valley

Chapter 07

Bundled in a thick cloak, Fengjiu sat next to a window inside the western wing and yawned by the fire as she transcribed for the seventh time a copy of the *Dari Psalm* as a punishment given by her teacher.

In her childhood she had been mischievous and had often been punished by her teachers in Qingqiu. Since her classmates' parents mostly worked for her family, however, they usually volunteered to take her punishments for her. She had been in school for so long but she'd never had to lift a finger carrying out punishments. How things had changed. She was no longer young at the age of 30,000. And being a queen, it was therefore lamentable that she was now bending her back over school discipline in the Biyiniaos' lecture hall.

From this event Fengjiu drew two conclusions: One, a dragon cannot fight against a local snake; her ancestors had not deceived her. Two, even a boar of a sidekick can survive ten wolves; again, her ancestors had not deceived her. The local snake in question was of course the Biyiniaos' stern schoolteacher, and her hog of a sidekick could only be Yan Chiwu.

How did things end up this way... Fengjiu had racked her brains for six months and could only scratch it up to unavoidable fate.

Half a year ago, she and Warrior Xiao Yan haplessly fell onto a protruded cliff in Fanyin Valley. After spending a short moment reminiscing about the past, the two of them again haplessly fell from the cliff down to the bottom. As ill luck would have it, they landed right on top of the Biyiniaos' (Adjoin-Winged Birds) second prince whose clan dwelt deep under these cliffs. Their hard times thus began.

This second prince was surnamed Xiangli, called Meng. His full name was hence Xiangli Meng, although he was usually referred to as Young Master Meng.

This particular clan had an ancient rule which prohibited unmarried males from leaving the valley on their own. But Young Master Meng had always yearned for the glittering world outside. He'd secretly intended on leaving for a long time and had picked a good day to run away from home. Unexpectedly, Fengjiu fell from the sky and knocked him unconscious the moment he left the city's gates.

Yan Chiwu was squished between Fengjiu and Young Master Meng. Being dizzy himself, by the time he regained awareness, the two of them had already been tied up and led to the Biyiniaos Royal Palace. On the royal throne was the bird queen, mother to Young Master Meng.

There were many subjects Fengjiu didn't care to study, but history was her favorite. She knew the Biyiniaos and Qingqiu had close ties. She winked at Xiao Yan, signaling that they mustn't let slip her identity. Xiao Yan's brain was denser than steel. He looked at her for the longest time and still couldn't figure out the meaning in her eyes. Lucky for her, he never knew she was Qingqiu's queen to begin with.

Knocking the second prince unconscious could be a big deal, or it could be a small one. If he never woke up again, it'd be a big deal. If he woke up in time, and there was someone to clear things up, it'd be a small one.

Luckily, Young Master Meng woke up in time and promptly soothed his mother's fury. Previously she had ordered for the two of them to be executed. Halfway to the death dungeon, the sentence changed into the water prison, but the water prison's gates hadn't lifted when another decree came out which said they weren't to be imprisoned at all. They were immediately brought back to the Grand Hall, now with respect and courtesy.

Fengjiu and Yan Chiwu were escorted back to the royal court where they were questioned previously. Someone had apparently made haste to the

Grand Hall a moment ago and spoke up on behalf of them. After an investigation was conducted, it was confirmed that the two of them were in fact the young prince and princess from the Owl Clan across the river. Admiration for their neighbor's academy led them here to study. They accidentally fell on top of the prince and everything thereafter was a misunderstanding.

In Fengjiu's mind, this story was the real misunderstanding. But since the queen believed it, who was to say they should concede their good providence?

This time in the Grand Hall the queen's attitude had changed considerably. She decreed that the two were now guests of the clan, and being so studious, shall be accepted into the royal academy to satisfy their eagerness to learn and also to allow the two clans' youths mingle...

Standing inside the Biyiniao royal court, Fengjiu thought to herself that despite hating to stick her face into books all day, she had attended school for thousands of years; she had only needed to put on a docile appearance and attending school again should not be difficult. But Warrior Xiao Yan was a free spirit who did not like constraints. He'd probably not be able to stomach the strict school rules. He might even prefer the water prison over books and pens.

For that reason Fengjiu suddenly felt nervous – what if Yan Chiwu suddenly said one wrong word and sent the both of them into danger. With his intelligence, she thought he could very well do so. But surprisingly, his performance was very good today. After stepping into the grand hall, he spaced out for a while, the anxiousness in his eyes gradually disappeared, and the usually hot-tempered man stood with his head slightly bowed as if he was obediently accepting the queen's arrangements.

Luckily, he only stood there in silence. With his handsome and humble outer appearance, they couldn't tell that he was the leader of the Demon Clan. At this time Fengjiu felt a bit strange. She followed Xiao Yan's gaze as it went past the courtiers standing on two sides and stopped at a young

woman in white garments and face veil. Because Xiao Yan was acting oddly, Fengjiu gave her a careful observation. However, she couldn't figure out what was different between her and the other white-robed girls, and eventually put it out of her mind...

That night the pair of them rested in the Biyiniaos' Royal Academy.

During the first few days, Fengjiu still had thoughts of escaping this valley. But after a little exploring, she discovered there was indeed no way out. There might have been a solution if she could use magic, but the strange thing about this valley was that one could only use magic within the imperial city boundaries. Not even the most powerful magic worked once they stepped away from the city. At first she thought of transporting from within the city. The magic would be used while inside to transport them to the valley's entrance. The result: she and Xiao Yan moved from the west side of the city to the east side, landed into a widow's home while she was bathing, and got chased out with a broomstick by her blind mother-in-law.

Afraid she would be stuck here indefinitely, for half a month Fengjiu's anxiety would increase day by day. She thought of the culprit who caused her to be trapped under here – Donghua Dijun on the 13th celestial heaven. She wanted to keep her distance from him, but among all life-forms outside this valley, Donghua was the only one who knew she had fallen down here. Therefore, she waited and waited for him to come save her. Of course she knew she had offended him just before falling into this valley. It'd be impossible to expect his arrival only after three or four days. She gave him some time to cool down. If he came after one month and took her home then she'd generously waive his misdeed for bringing her to Mount Fuyu and its consequential danger. Despite rumors which claimed Fanyin Valley only opened up every Jiazi, she believed that if Donghua wanted to save her, he would certainly find a way.

But a month, two months, then three months passed by, and Donghua was still nowhere to be seen.

Fanyin Valley was utterly depressing at night. Fengjiu rolled herself in a blanket and occasionally thought to herself how petty Donghua had been. They were fellow fairies, and he could've tried to care a bit more about his junior. But as she turned in bed, she came to think differently – such thing was actually hard to say. When she was still a baby fox, she understood Donghua well. He had always been cold toward everyone and everything. Jiheng was perhaps the only exception in this world.

Normally she tried her best to keep her calm demeanor. But as it turned out she had yet to reach the age of tranquil reflection. Only the fact that Donghua hadn't come to her rescue saddened her for days. When at last her mood lifted, she thought realistically and willed herself to wait another Jiazi for Fanyin Gu to open again. If she were to think again, this place wasn't so bad. Compared to being a sweeping maid at Taichen Palace, it was tenfold better. Her family would probably look for her, but they shouldn't be too worried knowing she'd never get herself in significant dangers. She cheered up after these thoughts.

At this point in time, half a year had swiftly passed by.

On a lightly snowed day under soft sunlight, Fengjiu had written ten copies of scriptures. She carefully held the parchment by its corners and blew on it so the ink could dry. Then she folded it up and planned on handing it to her teacher tomorrow.

Fanyin Valley's academy held a tournament every ten years to test its students. The victor's prize was that year's Saha fruit which grew on the tree next to the Jieyou Spring. Jieyou Spring was a holy stream in Fanyin Valley. It started at the Inner Palace and on its bank stood a Saha tree. This tree flowered every 10 years, bore fruit every 10 years thereafter, and only one fruit each cycle at that. The fruit differed each time and contained different magical uses contingent on that year's harvest. According to legend, the Saha was one of five magical trees on the Celestial Heavens. The other four were Grief-less, Jambhul, Bodhi and Longhua. 'The Buddha's lips are of the same color as the Saha's crimson shade.' Such was written in the ancient scripts. But ten thousand years ago, for some reason

all the Saha trees on Jiuchongtian ceased to bear fruit. Today in the Lower Realm, there was only one tree left next to Jieyou Spring at Fanyin Valley which still bore fruits. It became even more precious for this reason. Moreover, rumors had it that this year's Saha fruit still held a miraculous power. For mortals, it could revive the dead, for immortals it could increase one's fairy essence, for a female her beauty and youth would be enhanced to be more sparkling than the peaches grown from the Dowager Queen's garden on Jiuchongtian. Because this fruit's potency was so extraordinary, there wasn't one student who didn't vie for it. The competition hadn't started but excitement had already spread everywhere.

Such was the power the mustached-teacher received from the Biyinia Queen. Because the number of competitors were twice as many as the year before, there wasn't a single school that could accommodate all of them. The Academy informed the Queen and she decided this teacher would streamline the process by filtering the applicants pre-competition. Thus under royal edict, the mustached-teacher's one word could decide who would compete versus who would not. His power in the Academy was now the greatest, bar none.

Fengjiu found some time, slipped to the Jieyou Spring and looked to the distance where the Saha tree grew. Between the green shiny leaves was the legendary deep red fruit which had been compared to the lip color of the Buddha from the Far West. She stood from afar and fixed her gaze on it for a long time. If that tiny fruit could really bring back the flesh and bones of the dead, she wanted to try her luck just once to save someone she used to know who had long been deceased.

Fengjiu absolutely could not offend the powerful teacher who could help her attain that Saha fruit. When he punished her to copy scriptures, she couldn't throw them into a corner anymore. If she had to transcribe, then she shall transcribe. She started to become obedient with her entire body and mind. In addition, she thought of every way which would erase her misdemeanors in the past. Not only did she now have to be obedient, she had to kiss up to him as well.

But how would she go about flattering her teacher? Fengjiu knitted her brow and opened her workbook. Her punishment was to copy the *Dari Psalm* five times only. But she had transcribed it ten times. Hadn't she shown her reverence for the teacher this way? Was this not also a kind of flattery? Yet she still felt a little worried. What if she were to add at the bottom: 'May Lord Ji Han enjoy boundless blessings and a long life'?

No, what if the teacher wasn't in the mood to read, and never got to the end. Then wouldn't her effort have been in vain? It was still best to write that loathsome blandishment at the top of the page. She brought up the brush ready to write, but as she watched the snow accumulate outside the windowpanes, she became puzzled for half a day. Was the old man's name Ji Han, or Han Ji?

At that time, Yan Chiwu with half of his body covered in snow hastily stepped in. Because they were thought to be the royal siblings of the Owl Clan, they were arranged to stay in the same compound. The residence's name, too, carried a sense of the Biyiniaos' character. It was called Jifeng Yuan (House of Gale) and was located right next to the lecture hall. Yan Chiwu seemed to have forgotten Princess Jiheng and had turned to the lady in white whom they had met in the grand hall instead. Every day when school was let out, he'd stop by her place for a chat and thus had little time left to bother Fengjiu. Half a year went by thusly in amicable peace at the large estate.

Fengjiu raised her head toward Yan Chiwu who was now adjusting his robe and asked, "Do you know what our Fuzi's (teacher) name is?"

Utterly surprised, Xiao Yan replied, "Isn't Fuzi called Fuzi?" Then he stepped closer and excitedly asked, "The old geezer has another name?"

Chapter 08

Next morning, Fengjiu arrived early at school to ask her classmates what their teacher's name was. She didn't know kissing up would be this difficult, nor had she expected finding out her teacher's name was even harder than finding out the names of aristocratic ladies. After six months, Fengjiu had only befriended Prince Xiangli Meng at school aside from Yan Chiwu. When she came by his place, however, she found that even the prince didn't know what his teacher's name was.

It was the hour of the rabbit (5-7am), and on the sky was a lone crescent moon emitting a clear light. Normally very few ambitious students could be seen burning the lamp at this hour. There were noises today, however, that could be heard from some distance still far away. These were not loud, but were certainly coming from more than one or two persons. Fengjiu's sleepiness dissipated at the thought of catching something exciting. Early birds indeed get the best treats; it was a good thing she had slept less today.

A number of night pearls lit the large classroom. Fengjiu quietly snuck in from the back door and peered in. Most of her classmates were present. They flit back and forth looking very much as if they were secretly setting up an ambush around the school.

With a torn drawing in hand, one stood with arms akimbo commanding everyone else. This was Meng Shao's younger cousin, Princess Jielu.

Fengjiu stood nearby awhile. In that time, several of her classmates walked in; they were Jielu's close friends, and from their conversation, Fengjiu got the gist of what was going on.

As it turned out, a deity lord from Jiuchongtian was supposed to come today for a lecture on the art of tea. But yesterday before class was dismissed, their teacher had told them this deity could no longer make it due to unforeseen business and had sent another senior fairy to come in his place. Jielu and her cohorts' grand idea was to set up a trap to chase away the substitute teacher. When the class was without a lecturer, the previous

fairy might perhaps find time to come himself. Fengjiu had thought it rather childish.

She hadn't been at this school for very long, but she had heard many rumors regarding this immortal. In those rumors, no one ever mentioned his name, presumably out of respect, thus he seemed to be a very revered deity. It was said he held a very high position on Jiuchongtian, and was vastly enlightened in the Buddha's way. Nevertheless, he had never accepted a pupil. In the past, Tianjun had once made a request for him to accept Crown Prince Yehua, but it was ultimately declined. In short, this individual was a remarkable individual. Someone so remarkable, yet cared enough to come teach a clan as trivial as the Biyiniaos. Even though he came only once every decade, and only half a month to a month each time, his visit was enough to make the entire clan feel honored. The only regrettable thing was that this clan didn't mingle with other clans, and so this honor was kept concealed within the valley.

When Fengjiu first heard of the news, she recalled every deity she once knew on Jiuchongtian and narrowed the list down to two. One was Donghua; the other was Taiqing Daode Tianzun, also known as Taishang Laojun. To reject Yehua as a student was something Donghua would do. However, he wasn't one to trouble himself by coming here to teach. There were so many women in this valley. Didn't he leave the Demon Clan because he didn't want to be troubled by the females there? On the other hand, Taishang Laojun of Doushuai Palace was also a very interesting old man; but for Fanyin Valley to be in buzz over the Elderly Lord was something Fengjiu never thought of.

Day was dawning. Chiseled mountains came into view outside the windows. The overhead fog had dissipated. Green verdure hinted at signs of life in the snowy wind.

After the students had labored over the trap and stood to rest, Xiangli Meng happened to walk in and stared aghast at the scene before his eyes.

Meng Shao sighed and said to his cousin, "I know you love him dearly. But in age alone, he can easily be your ancestor's ancestor's ancestor. Your

feelings will only be a nuisance to him, and he won't come here to teach again." He sighed once more. "It doesn't matter to me, but my mother, Her Majesty, will punish you severely. When that day comes don't ask why I won't speak up for you. In any case, several days ago I heard he had found a wife on Jiuchongtian. Although they haven't yet taken their vows, they might as well be considered married. It is said he loves her very much, they even sleep and bathe together... Hey hey hey, why are you crying, don't cry..."

Princess Jielu gave no concern for her cousin's dignity and loudly wailed. He might have looked dashing and suave, but Meng Shao ironically didn't know how to deal with a woman's tears. He could only stay rooted wordlessly.

Fengjiu turned around and raised her hand to close her slack jaws. Then she supported herself on the table, slowly sat down, and poured herself a cup of cold tea to calm her shock. The most notable womanizer on Jiuchongtian had to be Tianjun's Third Prince Liansong. But even Liansong had never been rumored to have bathed with someone whom he hadn't married. And let's say that such a thing did happen, shouldn't it still be hushed up? She had greatly underestimated Taishang Laojun. Tsk tsk, turned out the old sage wasn't a vegetarian after all. He was absolutely forthright, absolutely brilliant, and absolutely exemplary.

Fengjiu was biting her pinkie in musing when she heard Princess Jielu say through her tears: "You're doing this on purpose. You have a crush on the queen of Qingqiu but cannot have her. That is why you secretly hope everyone else in this world would be as lonely as you are. His Grace is too virtuous to be a part of this absurd rumor. I won't believe one word of what you said." She stomped away.

Meng Shao's face paled at the mention of the words 'queen of Qingqiu' which Jielu had uttered, and which Fengjiu had heard very clearly. Her aunt Bai Qian was already married, but it seemed her reputation was still going strong. She could even break the heart of a man from a place as remote as this valley; she had made the Bai family proud. But the second

prince Meng Shao was a mere child compared to her aunt; she'd never give him a second look if they were to meet. Fengjiu shook her head in sympathy at Meng Shao who was standing dazedly in the distance. When he at last looked up in her direction, their eyes locked gaze.

After locking eyes for a while, Meng Shao raised Princess Jielu's blueprint and beckoned her over: "Jiu'ge, come here. You're the best at placing traps. There are still many flaws in Jielu's design that I can see. She wants to make it so that the visiting deity won't be able to come out to lecture for several days. How do you think we should rearrange this?"

Fengjiu understood that he was speaking to her when he said 'Jiu'ge'. She was using the Owl Clan's ninth princess's identity while she was in Fanyin Valley. The ninth princess's name was indeed Jiu'ge. Being a kind soul, Meng Shao was willing to help his cousin even after she had offended him. Fengjiu held a cooled teacup and moved closer to look at the blueprint in Meng Shao's hands. Mere childplay - it was nothing compared to the years of battles between her and her teachers.

Fengjiu pointed a finger to the lecture stadium and said, "Take away everything else. Use magic to create a well here and connect it to the Si'xing River outside the city. Then camouflage it well. He will definitely fall the moment he steps onto it. I guarantee he won't show his face for at least ten days."

Meng Shao knitted his brow. "Isn't that too harsh? If he gets out and condemns us..."

Fengjiu sipped her tea. "Or we can dig a deep pit and place magical blades at the bottom. The white blades will turn red with blood once he falls into the hole. Of course it's going to be more complicated throwing his body away."

Meng Shao studied the blueprint for a while and at length decided: "...let's go with the first."

Fuyu Mountain stood straight and staggering, covered in a dense forest. Although the season had entered into wintertime, the trees had yet to turn colors. The canopies were still casting verdant shades, leaving only small cracks of the blue sky above. In the sky were the flapping sounds of cranes. One could tell it was an extraordinary mystical mountain.

Zhonglin, the managerial official of Taichen Palace, was standing in front of Fanyin Valley's cliff side. He sighed in worries. Starting from more than two millennia ago, the Miaoyi Huiming Sphere had never been at peace. Every ten years Dijun used the lecture at Fanyin Valley as a pretext to come and purify the three toxins inside the Huiming Realm. Each time Dijun came here in the past, he had brought with him Zhonglin. But he didn't do so this time, and Zhonglin worried for the King's daily comfort.

Not many knew of the Huiming Realm's existence other than ancient deities of prehistoric times. Despite bearing a Buddhist name, it was not a benevolent place in the least. From the three worldly sins of greed, ignorance, and discontentment arose wars and potential extinction. To protect the Mortal Realm, Donghua created another world in seven nights to absorb the excess toxins which the Mortal Realm could not withstand. This world was the Huiming Realm. Tens of thousands of years passed by fleetingly. Owing to the Huiming Realm acting as a giant urn to contain the toxins, Heaven and Earth remained in peace.

Even so, if one day the Miaoyi Huiming Realm were to collapse, it'd be the end of the world as they knew it.

Unfortunately, Zhonglin thought, that apocalypse had come three hundred years ago. Although Dijun had seemingly averted it in time, more unfortunately however, was that Dijun's rescue had only served to prolong the collapse a while longer. How much longer, no one really knew. Within these past two centuries, the Huiming Realm's three toxins had begun to spread. Fanyin Valley was the only place left on Earth which was still pure enough to absorb the toxins. Zhonglin leaned back against the boulder and sighed again. Many misunderstood that Dijun was enjoying his leisure in the seclusion of Taichen Palace. Of course, he was enjoying his leisure

most of the time, but in crucial moments such as these, Dijun was still very responsible.

Yet Zhonglin wasn't standing here to sigh over the world's welfare. He was uneasy because Dijun was acting oddly today. From the Western Heavens, the Buddha came to visit Taichen Palace last night to discuss scriptures with Dijun, but in reality they were discussing the Huiming Realm's fate. Today's trip to Fanyin Valley's lecture seemed likely to be delayed. Whenever this had happened in the past, Dijun had sent another deity in his place. Thus being smart and quick, Zhonglin had sent a message to Fanyin Valley relaying that another senior fairy would be coming in Dijun's place. But when Zhonglin arrived to Mount Fuyu with a senior fairy who was knowledgeable in tea today, they already saw His Majesty's jade-like figure standing tall on the summit. From his finger came a mystical light, and through the beam he entered Fanyin Valley.

Fanyin Valley was a very strange place. In order to keep out worldly toxins, only on winter solstice each year could a powerful deity use magic to open the valley's entrance. The gate would remain open for two months henceforth. This year's winter solstice fell on today, which was why Zhonglin didn't think His Majesty needed to rush. Moreover, he had never been the type to rush. There were still two months when he could come and go freely into and out of the valley. Yet he left the reverent Buddha who was guesting at Taichen Palace for Mount Fuyu thousands of miles away. Surely, it couldn't have been for the Biyiniaos' lesson. Had His Majesty always been so magnanimous?

Zhonglin pondered without results and clucked his tongue – let's just think Dijun was becoming more magnanimous over these past two years. He turned around with the senior fairy and headed back to Taichen Palace.

The Biyiniaos' Royal Academy boasted a history of more than 18,000 years. It was said to have been created by tasteful immortals. Not only was the location excellent, the decorations were also unique. Encircling the courtyard were several dozen buildings. An artificial stream wound through the rugged terrain from east to west over small paved bluestones

steps. On the banks grew all kinds of green locust and pines. In summertime, their reflections on the water surface were serenely zen-like. At the moment in winter, the sole color of white snow covered the grounds. It was pure and desolate, but felt open and spacious²⁶.

Fengjiu loved these sceneries and often came here to stroll. But today she was in no mood to enjoy her surroundings. In her sleeve were the copied scriptures from last night. She continued walking along the stream in absentmindedness.

An hour ago, Fengjiu had skipped the tea lesson and snuck out to look for Master Ji Han because she had heard he would announce the list of this year's contestants before evening classes began. She was going to try to win his favor over time, but short on time, she could only skip class and hope to influence her teacher in one final attempt. But because she had also wanted to see the senior fairy sent by Taishang Laojun falling into her booby-trap, she whispered to Yan Chiwu before leaving to remember every detail as it happened and relay it back to her.

She thought she had taken care of those two things but Master Ji Han, whose whereabouts was usually predictable, was nowhere to be found. As she searched all over the grounds, she was starting to feel discouraged. Looking toward the classroom, she wondered if the senior fairy had fallen yet. She wanted to return to class away from the cold, but if he was smart and hadn't fallen, she'd be punished for playing truant. She thought back and forth, and decided it was still best to wait outside. As she waited, she mused she could've burned some of her homework for warmth if not for kissing up to Master Ji Han. Although, she had written ten copies. Burning one should be alright?

Fengjiu knelt by the old pine tree and reached inside her sleeve. Just then someone tapped on her shoulder. She turned around and saw Xiao Yan motioning a dagger against his beautiful face. "Say, should I make a cut

²⁶ we later find out that Fanyin Valley is in winter all year round, so I have no idea why Tangqi described its summer weather.

this way, or that way, or this way then that way? From a woman's perspective, which would make me more handsome, do you think?"

Fengjiu looked to be deep in thought and raised her finger to draw a 王 on his forehead. "I think you'll look best with this."

In a bad mood, Xiao Yan tossed the knife away and sat down next to her. "You don't think knife marks would make my face better either? Then say, what about beards? I think a beard goes well with my face..."

Xiao Yan's nonsense came through one ear and out of the other. She was glad Xiao Yan finally realized girls didn't like him because he was too pretty. But she also felt if one day he really wore a beard and had a 'king' mark on his forehead, girls wouldn't like it as much as his current appearance.

Two branches snapped from the weight of snow. Fengjiu sneezed. She disrupted Xiao Yan's thoughts: "Did you see Fuzi on your way here? Where has he been all day, I've looked for him forever."

Xiao Yan abruptly turned around and stared at her in surprise. "Didn't you know?"

"What... what should I know?" Fengjiu jumped and backed into the tree.

Xiao Yan scratched his head. "Seeing how downcast you are, I thought Brother Meng had alerted you after class was dismissed." Still scratching his head, he continued: "It's not that big of a deal, really. It's both bad and good news for you. Don't be anxious, wait and I'll tell you. Half of the bad news came from the booby-trap you set. The person who should've fallen didn't fall. But the teacher you're looking for... here's the good news, he stepped onto it and fell..." Xiao Yan paused to observe her reaction and went on: "Brother Meng thinks with the teacher's familiarity of the locale, you won't have much time to run. Only in half an hour he was able to crawl back from the Si'xing River and swore he'll skin you alive. According to Brother Meng's analysis of his facial expression at the time, there's a very large chance he'll do just that." Then he looked at her with dawning realization. "At first I thought it strange that you haven't run to

hide even though you already knew. Here I was still thinking you were a brave soul. Turns out you didn't know anything."

Fengjiu sat leaning against the tree while she listened to Xiao Yan. Her head reeled as she saw a dark figure advancing toward them from the distance, looking very much like her teacher. In the blink of an eye she had dashed away like a lightning reflection.

As she ran, she contemplated on stopping and explaining to her incensed teacher that it was all a misunderstanding. But in the end she decided to run even faster.

Life was unpredictable this way. Never mind flattering her teacher to participate in the competition. Even if she respectfully presented him the ten copies of scriptures on two hands, he'd only skin her faster.

Yan Chiwu chased after her calling aloud, "I haven't finished. There's still more good news you haven't heard..." Then, seeing their teacher fast approaching, he was afraid he had uncovered her location and quickly yelled out in a different direction. He was feeling satisfied with himself today. Finally he'd gotten a handle on the art of social interaction - this improvement wasn't a small feat.

Upstream along the bank was a wide patch of Saha-Manjuska²⁷. They bloomed gloriously against the snowy backdrop. Fengjiu had little interest for plants and flowers, so her knowledge on them was rather lacking. She only knew these were called Saha-Manjuska because Donghua had frequently used them in ceremonies. She didn't remember seeing anyone moments ago but at this very second there was a silhouette of purple elegance standing peacefully among the flowers. Fengjiu thought she was dreaming at first. From Heaven to Earth, no one was as eternally loyal to this purple color of garment and could wear it as beautifully as Donghua. But why would Donghua be here right now? If to save her, he would've

²⁷ Saha-Manjusaka – a celestial flower often mentioned in Buddhist texts. It is also commonly known as a cluster amaryllis or a red spider lily.

come six months ago; coming now was even less likely. It made more sense for him to be in paradise somewhere on Jiuchongtian reading Buddhist sutras or fishing by the lotus pond.

While she was busy dispelling her theory, she carelessly fell forward, but fortunately grabbed onto a trunk in time. She swept the flower patch behind the old pine trees on the other side of the stream once more from the corner of her eyes and this time the purple figure wasn't there anymore. She breathed warmth into her hands and turned around to check whether her teacher had caught up, bumping right into someone.

A few paces behind was her teacher. He was bent over with a hand on his ancient hip trying to stand straight. When he saw her retreating backward and wanting to flee away, he quickly caught onto her sleeve. Well, call her shocked! Her normally slow teacher was all of a sudden as agile as a rabbit. Before she could react, both her hands and feet were tied up by magical ropes. “Unruly student, stop right there!” she heard him say. “The first lesson students should learn is to respect their teachers. After your shenanigan today, I'll have to punish you to the water prison. You don't think it's unfair, do you? Because I see a water prison right here.” Before he even finished speaking, he had already begun the incantation to throw her under the stream.

There was no way to use a protective shield once she was tied up with magical ropes. Without a protective shield, she'd likely die if she was immersed in this frigid wintry water. But Fengjiu had never liked begging for anything even as a child. When she was tossed in the air, she even answered back in her Uncle Bai Zhen's cavalier way: “Crappy luck I²⁸ have today.” Then she proceeded to grit her teeth in preparation for her punishment.

Her teacher's face turned purple with rage. His long mustache curled up as his two index fingers came together. When the spell which would

²⁸ She's using the pronoun 爺 ye which is a lofty way to address oneself, giving her seniority over the listener.

immerse her into the stream was about to form, the two ropes binding Fengjiu's limbs suddenly became undone. An unhurried voice reached them from behind: "If you punish her to the water prison, who will take care of my meals?"

Snowflakes the size of goose feathers continuously fell down – the sky was shrouded in white. Donghua Dijun in his purple robe slowly emerged from behind the Manjusaka flowers by the two old pines. The snowflakes landing on his silver hair instantly melted away. He was singularly the most extraordinary deity in the world... wherever he stood, scenery turned into paradise.

The Saha-Manjusaka underneath Donghua's soles gradually made way for a snowy path. Fengjiu lowered her eyes and followed the trail of imprints he left behind in the snow. When it reached the stream, she snapped from her trance and looked back to Donghua, then turned and bolted.

For half a year there were times when Fengjiu even dreamed of her cousin Ah Li flying down to the Lower Realm in a flame chariot to save her. But to see Donghua here in Fanyin Valley was something she'd never thought or dreamed of. At first, she thought she wouldn't mind the fact that Donghua didn't save her from falling into the valley. But seeing Donghua presently in the flesh, simply standing in front of her with no trace of regret on his face for some reason outraged her.

Master Ji Han was exultant that he had tied up his mischievous student, but now misfortune had befallen. His feeble legs gave out as he knelt down to greet the King. But Dijun paid no attention to the fuzi's greeting. He hurried after the mischievous student he had just tied up. The kneeling teacher gave Dijun's golden words a once over. Was he saying he met the brat Jiu'ge today and found her clever, so he wanted her to serve him for a few days, or did he mean he had known her from before and came to save her when he knew she was being punished? His old heart leapt to his throat. Oh Lord, what trouble this was.

A soft current sent snow dusts flying above the branches. Fengjiu knew Donghua had caught up to her, but she would not stop. In less than three

paces, Donghua was standing quietly in front of her. Fengjiu walked on but he remained in her way. She looked up and glared at him. "Don't tell me you're here to save me. Where have you been the past six months?" She scoffed, "What, you finally remembered to come save me today? Well you know what, I²⁹ don't need it!" She whirled around and followed the stream to go back. When Donghua's feet appeared once more on the ground in front of her, she halted. "Go away, don't block me!"

Standing a meter apart, Donghua contemplated her awhile and at last raised his voice: "How amusing, are you being angry with me? What difference is there between saving you half a year later as supposed to half a year sooner?"

In one jump, Fengjiu retreated 30 meters away from him. The anger-flame within her threatened to erupt. How shameless of him as someone older. Did he ask her what difference there was between saving her half a year later as supposed to half a year sooner?!

Fengjiu clenched her hands into cracking fists. "You try turning into a handkerchief, getting tied to a sword's hilt, feeling the horror of being brought to battle, then getting thrown into a godforsaken valley for months. Try it, why don't you!" As she shouted, she suddenly wondered how she could have forgiven him half a year ago. Anyone lucky enough to survive this situation would stab needles at Donghua's voodoo doll every day. At this thought, she added with bravado: "So I feel a little angry, but I haven't yet poked needles into your voodoo doll because I have good upbringing, so how dare you still ask me what difference is there?!" She grabbed an old pine twig and snapped it in half. "If you ask such a stupid question again, be prepared to suffer in the same manner as this twig!"

Fengjiu finally felt her attitude toward Donghua was becoming normal today. Half a year ago when she was still at Jiuchongtian, she always minded herself around him. Unconsciously remembering she had once liked him two thousand years, she was always polite, always modest to

²⁹ Again, she's using the pronoun 爺 ye which gives her seniority over Donghua.

him. It was all her fault that she later got teased. When she was young, she had even yelled at Grandfather Buddha in irritation. Of course, it did her no good; her father had given her a spanking for her efforts. Nevertheless, she was able to express her bravery no less than a boy. She was the red fox Fengjiu of Qingqiu. How many people in the world dared to argue back to Grandfather Buddha, yet Fengjiu of Qingqiu did. How many people in the world dared to announce she'd snap Donghua in half like a twig, yet Fengjiu of Qingqiu did. She felt utterly satisfied and wanted to applaud herself. At the same time, she could guess Donghua would be incensed. Bigwigs almost never liked being insulted like this; she might not have a good ending today. And yet it would be good to resolve their feud in one last fight. Although she'd surely lose, and Donghua would snap her in half, how to handle her opponent would be up to herself.

Fengjiu felt her demonstration had been appropriate, because she detected a fleeting surprise from Donghua's deep placid eyes. This, she could predict. On Jiuchongtian, she had been too respectful. He needed some time to adjust now that she wasn't being respectful today.

Donghua regarded her quietly for a length of time and finally said, "So what you're saying is that you're very angry. And if I also turn myself into a handkerchief at your disposal, you might not be so angry anymore?" His brow crinkled into a smile. "This won't be a problem at all." Before Fengjiu could react, he really had turned himself into a purple silk cloth and floated down onto her head.

Fengjiu stood in befuddlement. At length she softly heaved; the handkerchief's corner slightly rose. Her heart thumped loudly: "Dear me, this isn't a dream?"

The silk scarf draped over her eyes like a bridal veil. She looked down to the ground and could only see specks of snow floating to her toes. She stood for half a day in rumination. She said this and that, but she wasn't implying for Donghua to turn himself into a cloth to appease her. Her brief tirade had cooled her down halfway, although she wasn't sure herself what

would appease her completely. That Donghua even came to this conclusion was rather remarkable.

Fengjiu reached her hand out and removed the silk cloth from her head. This purple cloth was slightly larger than the one she turned into last time. On it were stitches of elegant Bodhi leaf embroideries; the fabric quality was also a bit better. She could even vaguely smell the familiar white sandalwood scent Donghua frequently used. She shook it slightly and as it almost slipped from her hold, it automatically flew back into her hand, followed by Donghua's calm voice ringing in the air: "Hold tighter and don't let me fall to the ground. I'm afraid of the cold."

Fengjiu became absorbed in thoughts. Eventually she crouched down and gathered a handful of snow to encase the handkerchief inside. Next, she dug out a snowy pit in the ground and buried the cloth with satisfied delight. After half an hour had passed, she poked at the snow and took the wet cloth out, asking, "Hey, what else are you afraid of?"

"..."

When Yan Chiwu returned to Jifeng Yuan, he saw Fengjiu roasting a handkerchief over the oven fire. When had the brat embroidered such a beautiful kerchief, he was curious about it himself. But because he was preoccupied, he was in no mood for idle chats.

Fengjiu had been playing with the piece of cloth for almost an hour. Donghua hadn't spoken another word since she took him out from the snow ball. Nonetheless, in Fengjiu's opinion, men should always keep their words. Turning into a handkerchief to appease her was his own idea, not hers. She couldn't disappoint him by turning down his good will, now could she? And disappoint his good will she did not. After burying him in snow for half an hour, she soaked him in an icy stream a while more. By the time she was done, she had needed to thaw a thin layer of ice on the cloth. Then she wrapped him around a tangerine to squeeze the juice out. Afterward, she flattened him on a smooth rock to clean the pulps out with

a large brush. Finally she soaked him into water some more before fishing him back out to dry over the fire. Donghua never spoke a word throughout the entire process; Fengjiu thought him very brave.

Just moments before Yan Chiwu pushed the door open, Fengjiu was still staring at the handkerchief roasting above the oven fire. It was distressed to the point of having lost at least three shades of its original color. She felt slightly sorry for the way she had been treating Donghua. But compared to her original plan of deep-frying him in a vat of oil, which had been scratched because there wasn't any oil in Jifeng Yuan, but could easily be bought from outside, she had been rather lenient. She thought to herself that once she was done drying him, all their feuds would good-naturedly dissolve. They were divine beings after all; words such as 'generosity', 'forgiveness', and 'tolerance' were held important in their world. It was time she let him experience some of her virtues.

Crackle. A spark glinted in the oven. Yan Chiwu somberly pulled a chair over and sat down next to Fengjiu by the fire. He took from his sleeve a small parcel and shared with her half of his melon seeds.

The firelight cast a shadow of Yan Chiwu's angling profile; he was biting melon seeds looking so forlorn and melancholic.

Fengjiu observed him momentarily and felt Xiao Yan was truly a remarkable flower. When this flower was tinted with a hint of sadness, it was especially more alluring. If he wanted to become a hero any time in his life, he had better reincarnate into a different life. Otherwise with this smooth silky face, even with a beard and a 'king' mark on his forehead, he'd still be a stunning flower.

She suddenly felt sorry for the man. She neared him and asked in concern, "Warrior Xiao Yan, why are you sighing so disconsolately? What had happened?" Xiao Yan had always liked being called 'warrior.' She thought starting the conversation this way might lift his spirit.

Xiao Yan's troubled face seemed to calm somewhat. He raised his head to speak but ended up choking on melon seeds instead. In his haste, he

grabbed the handkerchief hanging above the oven fire and covered his mouth to cough the seeds out. Then he let out a heavy sigh. "Donghua the Ice Face had arrived at Fanyin Gu. Have you heard?"

Fengjiu quietly eyed the purple kerchief in Xiao Yan's hand. After using it to wipe his mouth, he seemed to plan on wiping his nose next. She shuddered and leaned back slightly, nodding.

Xiao Yan started to lament: "I used to think my magic wasn't far from reaching Ice Face's level. No, I actually thought I was slightly better than he is. But..." He agitatedly clenched the handkerchief in his hand. "When I was passing by the Shuiyue Marshland, I saw Ice Face using space-compression magic to contract the expanse of space between Fanyin Valley and Jiuchongtian..."

Fengjiu knew of this space-compression magic. The spell was often used by immortals who were nearing their deaths, and with the last straw of divine energy they had left, they would compress space to see the person or thing they most wanted to see in their last moments. It sounds like teleportation, but teleportation was a magic used to instantaneously transport within the same world while space-compression was used to close up space between different worlds. In principle, when mutual spatial compression occurred, the compressed space and time would act like a mirror in the middle, allowing the two sides to see each other without being able to actually touch. Fengjiu didn't expect to see such a grave expression from Xiao Yan. This magic wasn't difficult to perform for the accomplished immortals, and there wasn't a need to wait until dying moments to use it. But since the spell depleted energy every time it was practiced, few resorted to this sorcery except in times of crisis.

Fengjiu had a feeling something wasn't right, but she came up with a quick comforting answer: "There must be an emergency at Taichen Palace. Otherwise, he would not use such critical sorcery unless necessity calls for it. Since you don't like Donghua, shouldn't you be happy he has trouble at home? Besides, I heard that you, too, could use this kind of magic and sustain it in half an incense's time? Words have it that your Demon Clan is

the most proficient at it. Even on Heaven, there are few who are better. Pardon me for not understanding, what exactly about this situation that bothers you?"

Xiao Yan set his jaws and looked at her with wide puppy eyes. Sometime later, he slowly opened his mouth to say: "Chess."

"What?"

Xiao Yan dropped his face dismally to the side. "Ice Face is using this spell just to play long-distance chess with his friend on Heaven. I've but seen him a moment ago playing chess with that playboy Lian something." A pause. "I feel so defeated."

Fengjiu stood in silence and watched the dispirited Xiao Yan who was so different from his usual cheerful self. She raised her hand, wanting to caress his long black hair in sympathy, but half way through thought better of it and settled for a pat on the shoulder. "Although he's beaten you this time, there is one thing he'll always lose to you. Why should you use your weakness to fight against his strength?" Fengjiu had thought to merely console him with these words; she hadn't anticipated Xiao Yan to question her back even in such a situation: "For example?"

She carefully searched for an answer, took a step back, and tried her luck: "For example, you're better looking than he is?" Xiao Yan crumbled the handkerchief in his hand and threw it at her head.

The fire popped and crackled; the light purple hue made a circular motion before her eyes... Fengjiu finally comprehended what had felt wrong to her earlier.

After some time had passed, she removed the piece of fabric from her head and clenched it in her hand. Looking at it awhile, she set her jaws and asked Xiao Yan, "When was it you say you saw Donghua and Liansong play chess?"

Xiao Yan questioningly glanced at the handkerchief in Fengjiu's hands then questioningly glanced back at her. "Just now. They're still probably going at it. Ice Face was a step ahead when I left."

Chapter 09

To be slightly shameless was one thing, but to be as shameless as Donghua was a different thing altogether. She held tightly onto the incriminating handkerchief and rushed to Shui'yue Swamp.

Scattered snowflakes continued to descend. Fengjiu walked with lowered head and rapid steps, looking at the handkerchief in her hand from time to time.

She had recently considered herself a generous fairy who, even if Donghua hadn't become a handkerchief for her to vent, would forgive him after eight or ten years of grudge.

But he did deceive her, and it was unforgivable. Didn't he consider that she'd hate him for the rest of their lives if she discovered his deceit? Or did he think she wouldn't have the intelligence to catch his lie? From what she knew of Donghua, it was likely the latter scenario, and her fury at once doubled.

Shui'yue Bailu thrived inside the sacred swamp of Fanyin Valley. The Moon Water Dew in legends was a plant which lived every three thousand years and died every three thousand years; the swamp was also named after it. Although the water body was called a swamp, it was more like a lake; it encompassed a thousand acres where miles upon miles of Bailu were borne out of the water. Reportedly, the Queen of the Biyiniaoyan Clan was especially fond of the sky-high Bailu trees here and often came to relax at the hot-spring. For this reason, despite the marvelous scenery, Shui'yue Swamp had few frequenters and was habitually quiet.

Within the encircling fog and mist, Donghua indeed sat under an enormous Bailu canopy in the distance, engaging in a round of chess. The game was arranged on the water surface, fairy mist wafting all around. But with Fengjiu's limited power, all she could see was the vague space that had been contracted by Donghua. Liansong, whom Xiao Yan spoke of, was no more than a white silhouette in her eyes.

That white silhouette, however, saw her very clearly. For Liansong, the only fairy worthy of his attention besides Cheng'yu was this young Qingqiu monarch. Ever since he befriended Donghua, he had never known him to have a particular interest in women. This guy Donghua seemed to have been born a monk. Even Moyuan who was deemed the most monastic of monks was once in a complicated relationship with the ancestor goddess of the Demon Clan. But over the years, Donghua left no traces behind, and Liansong eventually lost interest.

Yet this same monastic deity recently seemed to have his eyes on the young queen of Qingqiu who was still essentially a child with only tens of thousands of years in age. This discovery came at him like a lightning strike.

Seeing that the fuming beauty had neared them within 100 paces, His Highness the Third Prince anticipated the show in glee. He tapped on the chessboard and asked Donghua who was still studying his next move, "Haven't you only arrived in Fanyin Valley? How did you manage to offend the Bais' princess already? She looks as if she wants to make you into mincemeat. I don't think we can call curtains today until some blood is drawn. What did you do to piss her off this time?"

The Third Prince was so delighted he momentarily forgot his next move. The black stone from Dijun's hand surrounded and obliterated the white pieces without mercy. By the time Liansong slapped his forehead in regret, Donghua was sighing softly as he saw Fengjiu approaching. "Nothing. I only underestimated her intelligence this time..."

"..."

How should she make Donghua pay? Fengjiu had carefully come up with a plan when she hastily ran this way. She was going to rail at him, and if that wasn't enough to quench her anger, she'd chop him into eighths. But it wasn't as if she didn't know her own strength. If they were to wield weapons, it was hard to tell who'd really be the one in pieces.

On the other hand, the handkerchief Donghua gave her this time was admittedly a work of art. She didn't pay attention when she was mistreating it before, but on her way here she had noticed a tiny embroidered 'Ji' on the edge. It didn't seem like a handkerchief he could conjure up at will, but felt more like something Donghua was carrying with him at all times. It was probably a handkerchief given to him from his beloved Jiheng.

Fengjiu suddenly recalled the piece of white jade Donghua had gifted her and how much she had treasured it. Seeing as how Donghua kept Jiheng so close to his heart, he'd probably slice her into eighths if she were to stomp on Jiheng's handkerchief under her feet. At this thought, she became more furious and hurt.

She admitted it wasn't nice of her to come up with this scheme. But the more she looked at the handkerchief, the more irritated she became. She strained her head and decided she would still have to carry out this wicked plot. She'd recite Buddhist scriptures later to make up for it.

Yet after every possible preparation, Fengjiu couldn't have realized her power was still deficient. Stepping into Shui'yue Swamp, she immediately came into contact with the space-compression spell and thus shape-shifted back into her original form. Of course, she was still a magnificent creature even as a fox. Her coat of fur was a blood-like fiery red while her four paws were snowy white. Like rising suns, the nine tails behind her glowed brightly like the finest aurora. Those who did not care for furry mammals would still be mesmerized by her looks. But to spew tirades at Donghua with this image was... a pathetic display to say the least. She might even draw a novel feeling and adoration out of him. But to return home now, no, her heart really couldn't bear it.

Donghua was appearing closer in her sight. It seemed he was capturing Liansong's stones one by one while patiently waiting for her to bring him more trouble. His calm and serene posture frustrated her. Her hesitation was immediately tossed to the other end of the world. She held onto the handkerchief and walked toward him with murderous intent.

Donghua seemed to freeze at her appearance.

She started. Wasn't Donghua very fond of furry animals? He wasn't falling in love with her now, was he? Her original form had always been irresistible. When she was little, there was a time when she had mischievously snuck croton seeds into her uncle's rice, making him suffer diarrhea for three days. But she only had to change back into her form and her uncle immediately forgave her. Such was proof that her foxy beauty had been deadly since young³⁰.

Donghua sat by the chessboard looking at her with a faraway absorption. It was the same sort of expression he used when he forged a sword, crafted an incense burner, or glazed a tea set.

At this point, the pale slender Shui'yue Bailu branches climbed high into the sky, enveloped by a thick canopy of green crescent-shaped leaves and frosty clusters of white flowers. A burst of snowy wind blew the graceful flowers from their branches, and before they could hit the water surface, they dissolved into white mist. A school of silver fish gathered 'round the roots, occasionally jumping from the water. Somewhere within the hazy fog came an unknown voice singing somber Buddhist hymns: "Subhuti, to attain anuttara-samyak-sambodhi, one should know, should perceive, should understand the dharma, and not produce images of the dharma..."³¹

It was such a vague and dreamlike scene, yet it seemed inherently suited for a divine immortal as Donghua. His penetrating gaze at this second was starting to make her perspire cold sweat.

³⁰ Hu'yan huoshui (fox face brings floods) is a play on the original phrase Hong'yan huoshui (beautiful face brings floods).

³¹ *Diamond Sutra (Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra)*, Chapter 31: the Buddha explains to Elder Subhuti that everything is illusory and he should let go of his preconceptions in order to attain anuttara-samyak-sambodhi, or supreme perfect wisdom.

She was reminded that this person was once the master of the universe. In theory, no matter how he mistreated her, as a junior she still needed to show him respect.

So then, she hesitated, should she trash his favorite handkerchief right now?

Fairy energy lingered floatingly around him. Donghua leaned on his cheek and gazed at the fox for half a day. At length he suddenly asked, "Did I perhaps save you when you were younger?"

She gripped the handkerchief in her hand and stared up at him. Momentarily stunned, she neither nodded nor shook her head.

It was surprising and pleasant to hear that Donghua still remembered he had once saved her. From Heaven down to Earth, she was the only nine-tailed red fox in the world, too precious, and too desirable to a number of kidnapers. For this reason, she used to combine her nine tails into one whenever she left home. This was a skill she had practiced for many years. Even someone as powerful as Donghua wouldn't see her nine tails without taking a closer look. This was why he didn't know the person he had helped was the child queen of Qingqiu.

Back then when Donghua rescued her from the tiger on Mount Qinyao, he had thought she was an ordinary wild fox with little cultivation, so he covered her with a protective shield and left. It had been two thousand years since, and her fox appearance hadn't changed much in this time.

Still, for Donghua to realize their old fate in this situation two thousand years later, she wondered if she was always one step ahead, or if life was always one step behind.

Fengjiu sat on the ground looking intently at the handkerchief clutched in her paws feeling uncertain. Her little uncle had been right. Vengeance was very easy to cool if you didn't take actions early. She had planned to throw the handkerchief in Donghua's face on her way here. But in this bewitching scenery, her generosity all of a sudden opened high and wide, and she couldn't throw the cloth anymore.

Receiving no response from her, Donghua inattentively said, "So then, I've saved you once, and you haven't repaid my favor. Then this time you can accord me by forgiving my deceit. Please give me back my handkerchief. I, too, will overlook that you've stripped it of all its color."

Donghua's words felt prickly to Fengjiu's ears. Her generosity was closing up fast. She lowered her head in reply, her voice as small as a mosquito's buzz: "Actually, I already repaid that favor."

"What?" Donghua asked in surprise.

She suddenly lifted her head and glared angrily at him as she asked him with a voice that was unique to her fox form, "Are you especially fond of this handkerchief? Because Jiheng had given it to you?" She raised her paw and shook the fabric before his eyes, then blew her nose on it, crumbled it up, threw it on the ground, and stepped all over it. She next gave him a glare before turning around and running away. A few steps later, she turned her head and made a face at him.

Donghua gazed after her beautiful figure, feeling that she was becoming livelier than she had been during her time on Jiuchongtian.

Prince Liansong watched the show from Yuanji Palace miles and miles away. Being the renowned expert, he had a few questions he needed to ask Donghua. "I think I've figured out what's going on. If you knew she is upset because you turned her into a handkerchief, and realized you needed to turn into one yourself to soften her anger, why did you conjure up a fake kerchief and upset her worse?"

Donghua looked down to the wrinkled fabric underneath his feet. If that had been him, he'd be just as tragic as the piece of cloth. "I'm not stupid."

"... Of course you're not stupid. But if you can resolve things after this, I'll call you grandpa here on out."

Donghua paused from gathering the chess pieces. He casually replied, "I heard Taishang Laojun recently developed a new medicine that can erase

selective memories. Without the antidote, you won't regain your memory again. Go ask him for a bottle for me one of these days."

"... You don't feel that's a little despicable?"

At this time, Donghua had finished clearing the board. He seriously considered the question then briefly answered, "No, I don't." Then he added: "Next time I see you, remember to call me grandpa."

"..."

The list of contestants was announced the other day. Sure enough, Jiu'ge wasn't on it. When she heard of this bad news, Fengjiu cocooned herself in a rumpled blanket and sat by the window in thoughts. Frigid wind couldn't push away her dejection. She sniffed her runny nose and asked Xiao Yan who was also in the room, "Teacher knew I was an acquaintance of Donghua's, and he seems the sensible kind. He should've let me be on the list even before Donghua opens his mouth to ask. How come my name still wasn't on there? Or perhaps the scribe forgot by carelessness?"

Xiao Yan sneezed and sighed, "I had no idea he is actually a 'san zhen jiu lie³²' person who doesn't bow before power. I better look at him in a different light from now on." Fengjiu wanted to remind him that 'san zhen jiu lie' wasn't an accurate usage in this case. But on second thought, she could see that Xiao Yan was starting to use idioms recently and displaying some culture which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. She looked to the thick snow beyond the windowpanes and sensed that it wasn't a good idea to discuss such high-logic topics with Xiao Yan, so she switched subject to a simpler kind: "Speaking of Donghua. You two were fighting before we fell into Fanyin Valley. I thought you'd be at each other's throat once you meet again. I was sure you'd find another opportunity to duel..." They hadn't, and she was dying with impatience.

³²三貞九烈 loyal and unbending – used to praise a woman's faithfulness and chastity

Xiao Yan's face reddened. He lifted his head and asked hesitantly, "Are you... worried for me?"

His eyes gleamed a kind of pride as he walked over and gave her shoulder a pat. "Good sister of mine! You are so kindhearted even though you are from Ice Face's household. I knew I was right to think highly of you!"

Fengjiu rocked from his strong pat. She was feeling slightly ashamed and didn't reply. He went on to explain: "Truthfully, the two of us had made an agreement on the very first day Ice Face arrived in Fanyin Valley. If he doesn't interfere with my and Jiheng's relationship, I won't look for revenge either."

Fengjiu massaged her shoulder and asked in puzzlement, "What does this have to do with Princess Jiheng?"

"Have I never told you?" Xiao Yan asked in surprise. "When Jiheng ran away with her bodyguard Minsu, Fanyin Valley was where they fled to." He scratched his head. His face that was like a blossom under the autumn moon suddenly glowed pink. "To be honest, I only found out half a year ago. Minsu whom Jiheng loved was in reality a cross-dressing woman. What's more, Jiheng's older brother was the object of her affection. They had a mighty row and parted ways. But Jiheng was too embarrassed to come back to the Demon Clan and thus she remained in Fanyin Valley as a mere court musician."

Xiao Yan's eyes glinted a vastly different beam as he excitedly told Fengjiu, "Do you still remember that day when we were questioned at the royal court? Although Jiheng had veiled her face, I recognized her right away. Our relationship has been great these past six months. I feel fantastic!"

The gibberish coming from Xiao Yan's mouth had sounded like alien sounds coming from some far off place. Only one thing managed to stick: Warrior Xiao Yan had finally learned how to use the pronoun 'I' (He's been referring to himself as 'this old man'). It was a great improvement, indeed.

As for Jiheng, Fengjiu tried to remember and could only recall her as no more than a symbol in her memory. Xiao Yan said they had met at the

royal hall, but she just could not associate the white-robed girl to the Princess Jiheng of the past.

Fengjiu's feelings regarding Jiheng were complicated. She wasn't like Zhi'he, and Fengjiu couldn't say with certainty whether she hated her or not. Although she was biased against Jiheng because of Donghua, she couldn't dismiss the princess's kindness toward her. She could still remember Jiheng had genuinely cared for her in the Wicked Lotus Sphere. Of course she had unintentionally hurt Jiheng on Jiuchongtian, but Jiheng had also hurt her in return, so they were even on that front.

She had never thought her leaving Donghua was a blessing for them, but she also couldn't believe Jiheng would leave Donghua on the day of the wedding. The Demon princess certainly had her admiration for this. But no matter what, these two had somehow met again here in Fanyin Valley. Having such fates would move even the heavens. Objectively speaking, if Donghua's feelings for Jiheng remained, their staying together could be regarded as a lovely fairytale. Even Yan Chiwu, the man with the largest intelligence network in the world, also said Jiheng was Donghua's one and only love in all these years. She couldn't selfishly wish Donghua a lifetime of loneliness just because of their lack of fate. Such pettiness wasn't becoming for the greatest queen of the eight lands, Fengjiu of Qingqiu.

The world suddenly opened wide before her eyes. Blue sky and white clouds greeted her. Her heart now at peace, she was in awe of her own self for generously blessing the two of them.

Except, that was that and this was this. The fact that Donghua as an elder had carelessly left her, a mere child, in Fanyin Valley to rot was unforgivable. She had rather hold onto this grudge forever.

But none of these things had really mattered. The one important thing that was distressing her was something else. She couldn't join this year's tournament, so how was she going to have the Saha fruit that was reserved for the champion? Without the Saha fruit, how was she going to save Ye Qingti? Was stealing the only option left? Actually, stealing wasn't a bad idea. Should she take Xiao Yan with her to this dangerous but very

meaningful job? Fengjiu contemplated, and to secure her success, decided if she was going to die, she'd have to take Xiao Yan along.

And yet it was by no means an easy task to steal the Saha fruit. On the surface no one was guarding the magical tree, but according to insider information from Xiangli Meng, surrounding the tree were four pillars, under each was a protective python. As soon as they discovered a trespasser, they would bite off his head before his hand could even touch the fruit.

Between the two of them, Xiao Yan was a powerful sorcerer. But she hadn't done enough research on the python pit of death yet. What if Xiao Yan was to be swallowed alive? She looked up to admire him for a while. Rosy lips and ivory skin, with a touch of melancholy. What a pity it'd be for such a beautiful person to be swallowed whole by giant snakes.

Fengjiu needed to find the perfect plan.

She racked her brain for three whole days.

Up to the morning of the third day when the first rays of sunlight shone on the snow-covered summit afar, Fengjiu still hadn't come up with anything. At that time, she found out Donghua was going to lecture on the art of tea this morning and class was to be held at the Shui'yue Swamp. The first thought that came to her mind was that she was going to cut class. But after breakfast, she calmly decided she didn't owe Donghua anything, so there was no reason to avoid him. After a moment of contemplation, she took two small notebooks from the mountainous heap and headed straight for the swamp.

Today's lecture was on the philosophy of tea. In Fengjiu's impression, everything that had to do with philosophy was lengthy and long-winded. But Zheyang enlightened her once: what was called lengthy and long-winded was in truth an intricate effort requiring impeccable attention to details; it was a display of an exemplary soul and superb understanding. Except Donghua's rambling was obviously neither due to an exemplary

soul nor a superb understanding. She had always known it was because he had lived for too long and time was the one endless thing he had in his perpetual existence. Thus the more time-consuming and painstaking something was, the more he found interest in it. For example, to make it more suitable for the lecture topic, he had arranged for class to be held all the way out here by the Shui'yue Swamp. On top of that, he took the effort to turn the wintry landscape into a lively spring scene. These were in truth trivial things which had little meanings to him; they mostly served as a way for him to kill time. She knew this side of Donghua well.

Fengjiu, however, mixed up her class time today and made a rare exception of showing up early.

No one was yet seen at the swamp. There were only several white-tailed fish leaping out of the water surface from time to time, breaking the landscape's stillness. Fengjiu yawned and looked at the young sprigs shooting from the Bailu branches. Around the ten-acre swamp, ice and snow had melted and given way to the colors of spring. With nothing to do, the warm spring weather lulled her into sleepiness. As she gazed skyward, she decided it was still early and so circled the swamp and chose a soft grassy patch under a large canopy to nap and perhaps think of a way to obtain the Saha fruit.

She hadn't lain for a full second when audible steps approached. When the wind brought with it the sounds of these footsteps, Fengjiu thought she was dreaming. But after a moment of consideration, she realized she hadn't lain down for long. She hadn't fallen asleep, so how could she be dreaming.

The owner of these footsteps was Jiheng. Her charming voice remained as it was three hundred years ago. Fengjiu didn't know why herself Jiheng's voice alone left behind a deep impression despite her face being a faded blur in her memory. So deep in fact, that the moment she said 'Teacher', Fengjiu knew it was the princess.

For Jiheng to call him such, the other person must be Donghua.

"Teacher, did you want the green-eyed crab tea this time? Then let me prepare the cerulean hibiscus tea set. You've always liked black ceramics to go along with deep green tea, but I think the hibiscus celadon set will offset the green color of the tea nicely, adding a bit of elegance. I believe using the azure cups will compliment today's spring scenery rather well." Donghua might have agreed, albeit noncommittally and with little enthusiasm. Nonetheless, Fengjiu knew if he could divide his attention to agree with her while checking the tea set, it meant he didn't mind Jiheng's distraction. No, everyone said he had feelings for Jiheng. That concurrence was certainly more than it seemed; it might even be commendation for Jiheng's knowledge.

While eavesdropping, Fengjiu thought to herself these were truly conversations of the sophisticated class. She may never reach this level in her life. At the same time, Fengjiu felt sorry for Xiao Yan. He'd always drunk tea from a mug. One glance and anyone could tell he wasn't compatible with Jiheng. What's more, Jiheng even knew Donghua's taste for black ceramics. Although Xiao Yan said the time he spent with Jiheng had been great, Fengjiu wasn't so sure that was really the case. At first, when Xiao Yan confirmed to her Donghua had feelings for Jiheng, she was naturally confounded. But now that she was seeing Jiheng again, as well as seeing the two of them together, she wasn't feeling much of anything. Time was certainly an effective medicine; she finally made some progress after so many years.

Through the red Saha-Manjusaka, Donghua had used magic to transform this area into a vibrant spring landscape which was so very different from the usual endless snow. Fengjiu covered her eyes, and through her fingers, saw the large blossoms rippling in the wind like a sea of red waves. She was submerged in that sea, which helped her hide even better.

After exchanging the aforementioned lines, the two began to prepare tea ware for the lesson and didn't speak again. As Fengjiu closed her eyes, she began to hear another series of footsteps softly approaching. They were likely bands of young girls who arrived early for good seats. She spent too

much time thinking last night and was now dead tired. She wanted to nap a little more when suddenly whispers arose from the right hand side. In spite of the Bai family's lax rules, eavesdropping nevertheless wasn't looked well upon. Fengjiu was about to cover her ears when these voices found their way into them.

She hadn't heard these two voices before. A young refined voice asked first: "Is the one sitting by the Bailu tree Donghua Dijun whom Jielu likes? Didn't they say he was born from the Blue Sea since the beginning of times, then why does he look so young?"

Another voice, more measured and calm, replied, "Deities from ancient times such as His Majesty are naturally different from us foxes. After one thousand years, our youth starts to fade, but Dijun's everlasting life comes from..."

The young lady from the fairy fox clan chuckled and continued in her elegant voice: "Rumor has it Donghua Dijun doesn't lust after women despite his power and position. But from what I see, the person preparing tea for Dijun at this moment is unmistakably a beautiful woman." She paused and then mischievously added, "Then the rumors were wrong. Say brother, if I were to..."

The calm voice suddenly became alarmed as he cut her off: "Princess, what do you want to do?"

Hearing no response, that voice spoke again in further urgency: "For the lady in white to be able to serve by His Majesty's side means she's not an ordinary girl. From what I've found, she fell into Fanyin Valley two hundred years ago and became a royal musician for the palace. The year after, Dijun started to lecture in the valley. After these many years she's still the only one he allows by his side. Princess, you're smart enough to know what this means. If you disrespect that lady, our fox clan cannot bear the consequences. Please think carefully before you act..."

A warm breeze blew by, sending the bright red flowers rippling in waves. The fox princess quietly considered her friend's reasonable words. Fengjiu

who overheard them was also in silence. She found out three things. First, the person with the unfamiliar elegant voice was the 7th princess of the Fairy Fox Clan. By a stroke of luck, she came for a visit last night and was allowed by the Biyiniaoy Queen to attend the lecture with her attendant. Second, Donghua didn't come to Fanyin Valley this time to save her, he came to see Jiheng. Third, the 7th princess's attendant was a capable man. To be able to utter sense and reason even in dire situations, Fengjiu could probably bring him back to Qingqiu to work in the royal court.

Fengjiu spent a moment in thought and another in revelation. When she heard their retreating footsteps, she raised her hand to smooth away the loose strands on her forehead. So Donghua had come to Fanyin Valley for that reason. Actually, this was more in line with his way of doing things. Others' wellbeing mattered little to him, but when they met again she thought he was here to save her. She suddenly felt embarrassed. He was undoubtedly laughing at her indignant face. To have the right to be angry at someone else, one should at least hold a place in his heart, or be at the very least an arm's length from it. But Donghua came here only to see Jiheng whom he hadn't seen in ten years; it didn't have anything to do with Fengjiu. It was actually quite simple; she could never be anyone to him. Fengjiu turned and adjusted her position. Her head was a big blank as she yawned sleepily. She began Zheyang's method of counting peach pits and lulled herself to sleep.

Although her slumber felt long, she kept drifting in and out of it. The tea lesson quietly went on without her. As she drifted back to awareness, she caught intermittent discussions on metaphysics and tea which quickly sent her back to sleep. She didn't know for how long she had slept. In her dream, she could hear retreating footsteps leaving further and further away, going with them was a soft grumble: "It's so rare to come by spring's warmth here at the Bailu forest in the dead of winter. Couldn't Dijun have been charitable and prolong it a while more?"

Prolong it a while more for them? Fengjiu felt sorry for the girl's innocence. Didn't she know Dijun's favorite hobby was to add insult to injury?

A moment later, something as soft as goose feathers and as cold as frost fluttered across her face. But that was only the beginning. The warmth on the grass suddenly went away. Biting gust flooded into her sleeves as snow dusts flew into her robe. Fengjiu jolted awake and sneezed in bursts. She strained her eyes open as the chill crawled up her spine. It was so cold that she curled up like a pupa in its cocoon. Her clouded mind seemed to say: "Bai Fengjiu, why are you so stupid? Out of all the places you could've picked, you picked this bloody place to sleep. Didn't you know once Saha-Manjusaka mingles with snow it will take people into perpetual hallucination?"

Soon after, she silently answered herself, "That's right, I'm stupid. So, so stupid." She shiveringly blamed herself for being brainless and passed out from the cold half an hour later.

Fengjiu apparently had a habit of acting coquettish whenever she fell ill. Seventy years ago, the high deity Cang'yi from Mount Zhi'yue fell head over heels for her only after witnessing her being sick once. This was proof that there was truth in the rumors.

A kindhearted person eventually saved her and brought her back to the insulation of warm bed quilts. Nevertheless, she had been freezing for half an hour in the snow and thus picked up a bad case of pneumonia this time. What's more, the excess poison from the Saha-Manjusaka still lingered in her system. In her dream, everything was one big chaotic tangle. She saw herself as a baby fox who was lying sick in bed after drowning from a fishing competition with the wolf on the other side of the mountain.

A hand touched her forehead. She felt cold with what awareness she had left and withdrew all the way under the bedcover. That hand slightly paused then tightly wrapped the blanket around her, leaving only her mouth and nose, and tugged the corner under her small chin. Feeling a little more comfortable, she sweetly rubbed her cheek against that hand.

She was very good at buttering up to other people when she was little. In the Bai family, she was a matchless prodigy in this. Right now, she was unconsciously letting slip her true personality. But even in her waning cognizance, she could tell that hand didn't lovingly caress her back despite accepting her buttering acts. This wasn't normal. She at once surmised that person wasn't impressed by her lack of effort, and thus poked her own hand out to grab that hand and earnestly nudged her cheek on it.

Holding that hand in her own, she could feel that its fingers were long and slender. They were cold at first, but had warmed up after shortly being held. In her foggy mind, she believed such gentleness could only come from her own mother. Even though that hand wasn't as soft or as warm as usual, perhaps her mother was also freezing from the cold weather. She suddenly felt apologetic and raised the hand up to her mouth to breathe warmth onto it. She was about to bring it close to her chest but it somehow found a way to escape before it could be brought to her bosom.

Her mother was clearly not buying her sweet act. This meant she was very angry about her drowning in Lake Wangsheng. Despite the care her mother was showing at this moment, she was likely going to receive a beating when she recovered from her illness.

"Still cold?" These words were soft and seemed to have floated in from somewhere far, far away. She couldn't distinguish the pitch or sound of this voice. She must be really sick. Pheww, if Mother had asked this, then the situation could still be salvaged. She should continue with the pitiful act and perhaps she would be able to get out of the spanking.

She nodded a few times and sneezed twice, then trembled her lips: "Feng'er didn't fall into the water on purpose, I promise. It's cold to sleep alone. Stay and sleep with me, mom..." She even added some nasally sniffs to bait her mother's maternal love. Anyone with any maternal instinct at all would give in right away. Fengjiu had to applaud her own talent at coquetry.

But her loving mother wasn't buying it today. A series of soft movements echoed, sounding as if she was taking the water basin out of the room. As

she stepped out, she mumbled, "She's starting to sleep-talk. It seems her illness isn't mild." Her voice sounded so distant; it didn't have any of the pity Fengjiu had imagined it to carry. Would her lack of pity affect her chances of getting out of a beating after she recovered? She didn't know. She startlingly thought of the cane whipping down onto her flesh and in her desperation, before her mother could leave, Fengjiu used her last specialty and buried her face into the blanket pretending to sob.

Sure enough, those feet ceased their steps. Fengjiu cried louder. That voice impassively told her, "There's no use crying."

If her mother, she thought, could coldly utter that sentence after the next second she'd call her 'Boss'. A specialty isn't called specialty just for show.

She was only sniffing softly a moment ago. Now she was wailing at full volume, pausing at all the right time and following the script to a tee. The other person sighed, "It doesn't matter how hard you cry, I'm not..." She immediately squalled more vehemently, giving even herself a headache and couldn't hear the last words that were said.

Her mother was neither leaving nor saying anything. She went for one more round and her mother seemed to still not buy into any of this. While being preoccupied with worries, she choked on her tears and started to cough in fits. But at last she had succeeded in luring her mother to come over and pat her back.

After crying so hard, tears and snots started to mix uncomfortably. She grabbed onto something resembling a sleeve wanting to wipe her face. In hazy awareness, someone's hand raised her face up and helped her wipe her tears. The hand felt cold, and she unconsciously turned away and sobbed upsettingly: "Leave Feng'er alone. Just let me cry to death..." But that person began to show great patience now, holding her hand and comforting her: "Be good." Those two words felt a little familiar to her. They were gentle, so she stopped her tantrums and stuck her face out to allow that person to wipe away her tears.

Although her mother was acting differently from usual, perhaps she was going to let pass the sea-drowning incident now. Pheww. At that same time, the voice that was gentle just a moment ago turned normal in a flash: “I’m a little curious. How loud can you cry, exactly? Or perhaps your sickness is preventing you from performing your best?”

What a waste of her crying. She wiped the stupid teardrops and moved further into the bed corner. “Mom, you don’t love me anymore. Leave me to freeze to death, leave me to cry to death, or if I ever recover, just beat me to death!”

A hand pulled her under the blanket and swaddled her up like a cocoon. “I don’t think I’m interested in tying you up and beating you.” In her mind, Fengjiu doubted that that was true. Why was her mother being so cold-hearted these days? There was no way she could get out of the beating now. After she recovered, the best course of action would be to run away to Zheyang’s peach orchard. In this case, she had better butter up to 4th Uncle’s Bifang³³ bird so he would take her.

As she pondered these thoughts, she felt herself being swaddled up even tighter. The steps went further away and then briefly returned. The blanket loosened as a heat pack was placed in her arms. She hugged the heat pack and sniffled twice more before falling asleep.

³³畢方鳥 Bifang niao – a bird which resembles a one-legged crane, has red markings on blue plumage, and a white beak. As recorded in 韓非子 *Hanfeizi*, it is a divine bird that accompanied the Yellow Emperor’s chariot when he traveled to an assembly of the gods and demons on Tai Mountain.



When she had had enough sleep and opened her eyes, she could feel cold perspiration covering her entire forehead. She knew very well how unseemly she could act when she was sick, but the scene in the room at this moment was still more than Fengjiu could ever imagine. At this very instant, Fengjiu in disheveled clothes had her head laid on someone's lap. Her arms were circling tightly around his waist. They were lounging on a magnificent bed completed with draping gossamer curtains. On the silk tapestry underneath the wall divider stood a unicorn incense burner; the soporific scent wafted fragrantly in the air. There were only two people she knew who would spend this much effort even on their bedroom decorations. One was the high deity Zheyang from the Ten-mile Peach Orchard, and the other was Donghua Dijun of Taichen Gong.

There were sounds of turning pages ruffling above her head. Fengjiu quietly looked up and saw the golden Buddhist seal on a book cover and a few silver strands hanging loose before her eyes. She perspired more profusely by the second. "Don't be alarmed, I didn't do anything to you. You unbuttoned your own collar in your sleep because you had felt

stuff.” The Buddhist scripture moved to the side and Donghua Dijun, the person she didn't want to vex, was right next to her.

Fengjiu gasped and moved down from his body. Faking death would be a horrible tactic at this moment. She had a chance to experience Donghua's patience already. Something as humiliating as this – calmly accepting it might salvage some of her face. She would never hope for her savior to be Donghua while she was awake, but she was unconscious and couldn't very well pick her savior. “Your Majesty has saved me yet again. I... I'm... very grateful. Of course, if you hadn't brought me to Mount Fuyu six months ago, I wouldn't be in this situation to begin with. But in any case, you still saved me this time, and I thank you for your help. This makes us even now, what do you say?”

Donghua was apparently very awake. He pulled his legs up, stretched his arms, and looked at her. “So you're still upset that I didn't come to save you six months ago, and about the handkerchief incident as well?”

How could he still have the bravado to mention these two things? She coughed in fits. “Those two things...” Of course there was no way these warts could disappear within a night or two.

Fengjiu fixed her garments. She was indeed emotional when she first saw Donghua a few days ago, and was easily upset when he teased her. But her personality was such that she also easily forgot once she was able to get it out of her system. “You reap what you sow. Your Buddhism understanding is much better than mine, I'm sure you know this concept better than I do. It doesn't matter how I see things, because it's all subjective.”

At this, her expression suddenly became complicated as she added: “Actually, there's something I want to ask more than those two things. I know I may act peculiarly when I'm sick, but...” She paused, set her jaws, and continued: “I tend to feel cold because I have a weak body, so I probably mistook you as a source of heat. But if you had pushed me away, I wouldn't have come toward you again. So why didn't you push me away? Why did you have to let me fall into this awkward situation?”

Still looking utterly nonchalant, and even seemed as though he found her question strange, he answered her, "You came into my arms on your own. Being such a rare chance as it was, reasonably speaking, why should I push you away?"

Fengjiu watched his casual fingers rested on the sutra. What distorted reason was he talking about now? After a lengthened time, she was able to come up with the next thing to say: "I don't remember Your Majesty as someone who had ever cared for reason..."

The incense fragrance was beginning to fade. Donghua stood up to open the burner's lid. As he added more incense, he casually replied, "When I don't want to speak of reason, I don't. But occasionally when I want to, I do."

Fengjiu lowered her gaze at him, not knowing yet how to respond. Regardless whether she was a fox or a human, communication was always difficult between her and Donghua. Considering she had only woken up from a severe illness and was still feeling exhausted, she reckoned she would surely lose if she were to insist in fighting this verbal war. She glumly scratched her nose and gave the room a sweep. She noticed a slender plum vase placed in front of the wall screen, poking out irregularly in true Donghua style.

How long did her sleep last? It must not have been short. She was worried Xiao Yan would be looking for her. While Donghua was pouring out the ashes, she stepped down from the bed and looked for her slippers. It didn't seem right to just leave like this, so she cleared her throat and thanked him again. "I'm grateful for your help this time, but it's quite late now and I've troubled you long enough. Goodbye." Donghua unhurriedly hummed in accord. Then as he put the lid back onto the incense burner, he said, "I heard you once fell into a snake pit on a late night stroll when you were younger and could never leave home at night again. Have you looked to the sky at this moment? It's dark outside..."

The curtain lifted then lowered instantly. In a flash, Donghua, who had just finished adding incense to the burner, was knocked down on the bed

by Fengjiu. Taken by surprise, he asked, "Aren't you overreacting?" He had only finished speaking when she clamped her hand over his mouth tightly. Weighing on him, Fengjiu's face was covered in solemnity and circumspection. She was so tense she didn't even realize her lips were a breath away from his. "I didn't mean to push on Your Majesty like this, but please be patient just for a little while and don't make any sound. I saw a shadow flitting by just now. I think it was Princess Jiheng. I wonder if she wanted to come in."

It truly wasn't Fengjiu's intention to knock Donghua down like this. When she lifted the curtain, she saw a white figure beyond the pearl strands that looked very much like Jiheng. Fortunately, Donghua's bedchamber was quite large. Outside the inner chamber was also a steaming hot spring. Jiheng probably heard their exchange and was about to come in. Her moving silhouette startled Fengjiu and instinctively she returned to cover Donghua's mouth to prevent him from speaking lest Jiheng discover them. But in her haste, her feet got caught by the rug on the floor and she ended up lurching at Donghua like a hungry predator, knocking him flat onto the bed with her pressing on top.

Donghua raised his brow and lifted her hand away, but complied and whispered back, "Why can't we make sounds if the princess comes in?"

Fengjiu thought to herself. It was the third hour in the night and Jiheng was coming to his bedroom. This meant their relationship wasn't ordinary. If the princess discovered her on his bed, she didn't know what sort of bloodshed would follow. Meng Shao read her fortunes the other day and told her she had better take caution since there was an ominous star hanging over her head. If this situation didn't call for caution then she didn't know what did. Although these were her thoughts, her mouth was uttering something completely unrelated and unsuitably solemn for her age: "If there exists a predestined chance between you, then you should treasure it. If you can avoid misunderstanding, then avoid it. In the past, I had loved someone but no matter how much I asked Heaven, I wasn't

granted any chance. You probably don't know this, but fate is a rather difficult thing to come by."

Even she was surprised that she was able to composedly say these things to Donghua now. Looking down at Donghua, she thought it must not have been easy for him to keep his perfect aura despite being trapped and mouth-covered for so long. She embarrassingly moved off of him a little to relieve some pressure from him while at the same time perked her ears to listen to the movements outside.

Donghua quietly gazed at her awhile and suddenly asked, "I feel like there's something you've misunderstood me for?" He'd only just finished speaking when Fengjiu clamped his mouth shut again.

Perking her ears up, the footsteps outside were becoming more audible by the second. The room was brightly lit behind the curtains. Everyone but the blind could see that Donghua was still up. And what was Jiheng doing... it couldn't be that their relationship had progressed to... this stage? Jiheng couldn't really want to enact a special scene of lifting his bed curtains at three in the morning? Shock sent Fengjiu's hands shaking. Yet through her shock she was able to eye Donghua a signal telling him to keep Jiheng outside for now. In the blink of an eye, the world turned upside down. By the time she regained her bearings, the situation had somehow shifted to hers being on the bottom while he was on top.

Their movements weren't quiet. The footsteps outside hesitated a little. Fengjiu widened her eyes at Donghua and the silver strands hanging down his forehead. As if he could care less that this embarrassing scene was about to be discovered, he held Fengjiu with one hand and touched her forehead with the other. His action was firm yet his voice was gentle: "Have you caused enough trouble? If yes, then lie still. I'll go get you some medicine." But wretchedly he didn't lower his voice yet again. Anyone standing outside, even beyond the hot spring, could hear. Fengjiu groaned inwardly. That was it, then. If Jiheng made a big fuss and wanted to hang herself, what was she going to do? She had better leave the scene right this moment. Unfortunately, before stepping down from the bed,

Donghua with an utter lack of integrity had bundled her tightly within the blanket and used a spell to bind her. She couldn't escape no matter how hard she resisted.

When Donghua lifted the curtain and stepped out, Fengjiu counted silently in her head: one, two three, Jiheng's gonna cry, gonna cry, gonna cry. The curtain lifted and lowered. A blast of light flooded across half of the room divider. But there was no sound of Jiheng's crying. There was only Donghua's voice outside: "You're here just in time. Help me look after her." The answer was still: "Yes, Your Majesty." She was undoubtedly Jiheng, but why wasn't she crying, or fussing, or complaining? Could Jiheng have been so strong? What could Donghua mean by treating his beloved this way? Fengjiu curled under the blanket, her mind in a topsy turvy mess.

Later as she shared this perplexing story to Yan Chiwu and asked for his opinion, he at once roused the dreamer from her sleep: "I know. Ice Face isn't that generous. He resents my friendship with Jiheng despite agreeing to it, so he's pouring his displeasure onto her."

Fengjiu seemed confused. Xiao Yan patiently explained: "Look, Ice Face did what he did to let Jiheng know that there was still an attractive woman on his bed who was willing to act coquettishly to him. That attractive woman is you, of course. What Ice Face really wants is to hurt Jiheng because it hurts him when she spends time with me. From this, we can see Ice Face's feelings for Jiheng are still strong. He must hurt her in order to soothe his own longing. Is this how you use the word 'longing'? Hold on and let me look it up in the dictionary first. Hey hey, don't look at me that way. That's what they write in the books!"

Xiao Yan smirked slyly, "Ice Face's treatment of Jiheng would only give me more opportunities to take her away from him." She had to admit Xiao Yan's face was such a tragedy. Even when he sneered he was still as exquisite as a jade. Fengjiu dissuaded him: "Don't be that way. The Buddha says you'd rather demolish ten temples than to destroy someone's love." Fengjiu's words seemed to have affected Xiao Yan. "You're right,"

he said. "Is there any consequences if I destroy their love?" Fengjiu mulled over his question awhile: "No, I guess not. Never mind, you can do whatever you want." The profound exchange pretty much ended here.

Logically speaking, Xiao Yan's explanation wasn't sound, but on an emotional level it did make sense. And since logic didn't exist in love, Xiao Yan's words could be trusted for the time being. That day, Fengjiu took her chance before Donghua came back to shape-shift into a small fox and crawled out of the blanket that was trapping her, then slid out through the curtains. When she got to the hot spring, however, she was stopped by Jiheng. The princess's colorless lips on her pale face suddenly gained back their color. After a moment of apprehension, she said to herself, "So it was only a fox. I'm overthinking." She didn't know what Jiheng had meant. She only took her chance to run outside as fast as she could. Through Xiao Yan's recent analysis, she still didn't fully understand Jiheng's words. It seemed she had perhaps ruined Donghua's plan of injuring the princess.

There were such things as these intricate turns in love. Without understanding these winding turns, she showed up at Taichen Palace wanting to win over Donghua with merely her courage. Naturally she failed, and only today did she find out there existed such underlining principles as these.

Chapter 10

Fengjiu didn't see Donghua again in the ensuing days.

At first she wondered if she had ruined his plans, and was sure he was going to punish her for it. Even while resting from her cold, she came up with counter-measures should she see him again. But for several days, the school didn't schedule Donghua for another lecture. One afternoon after class ended, she paid close attention to Princess Jielu who had always expressed great interest in Donghua, but the only thing she heard from her was a few grumbles to their fellow classmates that he hadn't come to teach. Nothing else of value was mentioned.

Donghua came here to see Jiheng. Now that they'd seen each other, perhaps he had gone back to Jiuchongtian. But if he loved her, why didn't he just take her away from this place? Why wait every ten years to meet? Was this possibly one of the new hobbies he discovered during these past few hundred years? During the years she wasn't with him, Donghua had indeed become increasingly confounding.

Today, Meng Shao invited her and Xiao Yan to Zuilixian, a famous restaurant in the capital, for drinks. Zuilixian had recently acquired the most beautiful dancer in the entire city. Meng Shao watched her with great delight. Then, sloshed after a few drinks, he had let spill the secret of the four pythons guarding the Saha tree. But Meng Shao's speech, not unlike his essays, had never been articulate. The secrets he spoke of were muddled and disorganized. Thanks to Xiao Yan's ability to succinctly summarize things, they were able to conclude that on the 15th of each month, the pythons left their pillars to absorb mystical essence from heaven and earth, and thus for a few hours, there would be no one to guard the magical tree.

Should they try their luck during this gap?

Opportunely, there was a full moon that very night, and there was no better time to act. One never knew, maybe the magical fruit would be hers tonight.

Listening to Fengjiu, Xiao Yan was lead to believe this year's Saha fruit could also make a man out of someone apart from the unprofitable uses he already knew. He gladly joined in. To begin, he connected an underground passage from beyond the city walls to the Jie'you Spring. Playing the hero, he even volunteered to explore the path in advance.

Fengjiu had felt a teeny tiny bit guilty before Xiao Yan so heroically jumped down that pitch-black tunnel. After a long time, he did not come back. It would be ridiculous for Warrior Xiao Yan to be devoured by mystical-energy-sucking pythons. But he was ultimately a Demonic Lord who had committed many misdeeds in the past. What if Heaven was punishing him this time... she stared into the bottomless abyss, squeezed her eyes, and jumped down as well.

Sky cavern. This meaningful term was used to signify that at the end of a dark cavern there was to be a blue sky. The passageway Xiao Yan created for some reason became a three-legged intersection. Before she knew what to do, she fell to the bottom of one of these paths. Xiao Yan said the tunnel he made connected to the Jieyou Spring. Once she exited the tunnel, it should lead straight the spring where she would be met with water instead of air. This was why Fengjiu had gone as far as to ask Meng Shao for a water pearl beforehand.

At this time, however, the cavern she fell into was an enormous space. Above her head were howling wind and storming cloud. Below was an endless green forest swaying in the blasting wind. She hugged herself close as she stood atop a canopy. This wasn't the aquatic world Xiao Yan had spoken of. Was she lost? Had Xiao Yan, who had gone out to explore and hadn't returned, also gotten lost? Bravo, he had made the secret passage himself and still got lost. What a genius. The Demon Clan must be a more charitable place than common belief for Xiao Yan to retain his throne through all this time.

Fengjiu hid herself among the verdure while massaging her bruised shoulder. A blood-colored moon hung low at the far end of the horizon. Such scenery was surely sinister. She had most likely fallen to a forbidden

demonic land somewhere. Xiao Yan remained on her mind. While she was debating whether to look for him here or to turn back and look for him at the spring, a string of laughter suddenly reverberated at the end of the forest. It must be a beautiful young demoness, Fengjiu thought, for her laughter was rather grating to the ears. Not having seen a demon in years, she wanted to at least sneak a peek before leaving this place. So she slid a way down, pressed herself against the leaves, and looked out toward the sound of the laughter.

Coming into her sight at the end of the flower path was a purple-robed deity sitting in lotus position, his sword placed by his side... Why, wasn't this Donghua Dijun whom she hadn't seen for several days? What was he doing here? With his eyes closed, he had seemed to be meditating. As she was about to move in closer for a better look, a pair of smooth ivory arms snaked to his shoulders and slowly inched their way down around his waist. An alluring face emerged on his shoulder. Her ebony hair entwined with his silvery one, her smile as elegant as an orchid. "Your Grace, you only come once every ten years. Do you know how much I've missed you, or how agonizingly I've waited for you?"

Her honeyed words flitted to Fengjiu's ears. Sitting atop the tree bough, she lost her hold and carelessly fell to the ground. The girl's enticing eyes swept in her direction, and with her bare arms still encircling Donghua's neck, she laughed: "Is there anyone in the world who's as bad at romancing as you? How can you bring along two other women on a rendezvous with me? Aren't you afraid I'd be saddened...?"

It was quite breezy out here, why were his garments so thin...? As Fengjiu pondered on this, she averted her gaze and realized the girl's meaning when she said 'two'. It turned out there was someone else who had been standing under the tree for a while now – Princess Jiheng in her fluttering white dress. Today, not only was the princess's dress the color of snow, her expression, too, was frosty white. She looked to Donghua, her lips forming a closed line; on her face was a pained expression. Fengjiu felt sorry for her. Luckily, Donghua chose to open his eyes at this exact moment. A

strong gust shook the forest and a flurry of petals came raining down. Within the flower rain, Donghua furrowed his brow toward the young ladies and asked, "Why have you come here?"

Not 'the two of you', just 'you'. Fengjiu scratched her head trying to think of an answer while Jiheng woefully spoke up behind her: "Teacher, I was worried for you. I had such a difficult time finding my way here, but you're... I..." Fengjiu quietly comprehended the scenario; so Donghua was asking Jiheng. She brushed her nose and raised her ears to listen, waiting for Jiheng to continue. As she waited, she took notice of the flying petals in the air. They resembled the holy Fuling flowers from Jiuchongtian she once liked best, but these shouldn't be growing at this foul place. Jiheng still hadn't said a thing more. Fengjiu lifted her eyes to look at her. The demoness had audaciously pressed her face to Donghua now, and the king was showing no intention of moving away. Jiheng finally couldn't seem to take any more of this, and with her hands curled into fists, she turned and ran.

The demoness who had her hands around Donghua was still smiling from the corner of her eyes. She said to Fengjiu, "This young lady is different from her sister; she didn't run away from an intriguing scene. You want to stay around to witness my lovemaking to the King?"

Fengjiu dug around for a while before finding her Taozhu sword. She raised her head and returned the temptress's bright smile with one of her own. "Be my guest. I see no harm in standing around to watch."

With her head rested on Donghua's shoulder, the demoness's expression instantly changed. Her laughter ceased as she lowered her voice: "Have you seen through it?" She then sneered, "Very well. If you want to wade through this muddy water, I shall grant you your wish." In an instant, she had leapt several paces back. A red damask sash shot forward - this was a move aimed for the vital neck area.

Only a moment ago, Fengjiu was still debating whether or not she should meddle in this affair.

When she first saw the pair through thick foliage, she too, had wondered since when Donghua had fallen for that beautiful enchantress. At the same time, she also wondered how it had been possible for him to love Jiheng while simultaneously have affection for someone else. Did such a love exist in the world? How complicated, this thing called love. She often did not understand it.

Not until she inadvertently gazed up and saw turbulent clouds rolling in and the moon alternating from white to crimson did she suddenly perceive the situation.

There had to be strong opposing forces between these two for this strange phenomenon to occur. Jiheng ran away in jealousy because she hadn't noticed that in spite of Donghua and the demoness's seeming intimacy, there existed a hidden struggle between the two.

Donghua was so handsome that it was possible that the demoness truly did harbor feelings for him. On the other hand, he left her to her wiles perhaps so that Jiheng and Fengjiu would leave this pernicious battle ground. Fengjiu reckoned he had been worried for her and the princess. Suddenly, he seemed kind and noble to her. It was different had she not recognized his kindness, but how could she leave him behind when he had been so honorable?

Vile spirits practiced vile sorceries. Among them, seduction was one of the most dreadful. The more beautiful a temptress was, the easier she could beguile her victims. It mattered not if one was a god or a demon. As long as there was worldly longing in one's heart, it was easy to be entrapped. Although Donghua had phenomenal cultivation, he did harbor feelings for Jiheng. And among the six emotions, love was always first. It was difficult to guess what the consequences would be if the demoness were to use her seduction power on him; Fengjiu's presence here could only help in part. She sighed once again. Why hadn't Jiheng seen this? If she had, there would be an extra helping hand, and they'd have a higher chance at winning. Women.... they were always so sentimental!

Fengjiu reckoned her situational analysis today was exceptionally swift. Her movements, too, were swift. In the midst of flying Fulings, her long blade moved like flashes of light. They had been fighting for a while but the demoness's damask sash had yet to touch her body. Fengjiu was quite happy with her display today.

Donghua leaned on his palm as he watched Fengjiu flit and fly like a white butterfly in the petal rain. This was the first time he saw her complete sword dance. It was said her swordsmanship was learned from her father Bai Yi. If he remembered correctly, Bai Yi's swordsmanship was known for its tenacity. But she had demonstrated it much more gently. Each movement was exquisitely graceful; her composure and poise were also quite good. To be able to duel against Miao Luo, who was created from the Huiming Realm, at her age and cultivation could be seen as a rarity.

Truthfully, Fengjiu had not guessed incorrectly at first. The purpose of Donghua's trip this time had been to quell evil. This girl wasn't an ordinary demon, however. She was a manifestation of the three toxins seeping from the Miaoyi Huiming Realm. Once this manifestation came to being, His Majesty the King himself would need to be troubled. Nonetheless, Donghua had trapped the original essence in the Huiming mirrored world. Every ten years, a small amount of toxin escaped out and drifted down to the living world. She was more powerful than ordinary demons, but was yet a cause of concern for Donghua.

He hadn't intended to let the demoness close to him to chase Jiheng and Fengjiu away for their own safety. The closer the demon was to him, the easier she could use her seduction power. But the closer she was to him, the easier he could also destroy her. There was really no need to push her away.

Fengjiu misunderstood that he had acted for her and Jiheng's sake, and was even touched by that small gesture.

Nonetheless, it was still a hostile environment. Although Miao Luo was only a manifestation of the true form, she was still an imposing threat compared to Fengjiu and Jiheng. It was natural they should be afraid of

her. He didn't know why Jiheng was here, but she had recognized the danger and ran away; it seemed she was tolerably smart. In his impression, Fengjiu was clearly smarter than Jiheng. One might think she would slip away even before the princess, but for some reason she had stayed instead.

He studied her for a while and began to doubt himself. For a moment, he couldn't discern whether the white-robed girl in the sword stance protecting him was the same Fengjiu he knew. But although it was hidden, he could clearly see her phoenix flower mark... and it was very real. Her sparkling eyes were also the same familiar image he knew from Jiuchongtian. Did she really think he was manipulated by the enchantress and wanted to save him?

Donghua leaned on his palm and quietly looked at Fengjiu who was standing with her sword in hand. Since the day he was born from the Blue Sea and climbed the mountain of skeletons until now, there were numerous of those who came to ask for his protection, but he never thought there would be someone who wanted to protect him. 'Protection' mentioned alongside his name was but a laughable jest. But right here right now within the petal rain, the fragile young queen from Qingqiu was fencing her thin blade against a much more formidable monster to protect him. This was certainly an interesting surprise for Dijun.

When Fengjiu drew her sword for the second time, she realized her chances of winning against the demoness were very slim. She stayed behind to help him, but that had been the extent of her intention. She was only planning to prolong enough time for Donghua to find a chance to act. She hadn't thought to take the task of killing Miao Luo away from Donghua's hands.

In the first half of their battle, Fengjiu felt she had defended rather well. In the following half, she dearly hoped Donghua could quickly leave his seat and lend her a hand. When she gazed toward him, Dijun was leaning on his palm and looking at her with a bright gleam in his eyes. She vaguely saw three syllables forming on his moving lips. Fengjiu pondered in silence. Between the first and second, and second and third syllable were

mystical pauses. Perhaps it contained a sublime meaning, and would help her swordsmanship rapidly improve. But the wind was screeching too loudly with each of her blade swing. What exactly were the three profound words he said? Only until the damask sash clawed onto her shoulder did she finally get it. "Be careful!" he had said.

Luckily, the sash was fast but it wasn't very forceful. It only managed to cut a piece of her silk dress. She was able to fend off the next strike with her sword.

As Fengjiu fended off her opponent's attack, she thought of the strong force coming from the Miao Luo's red sash just now. It was about to knock away her sword when for some reason, the energy weakened substantially. She took her chance and struck back, pushing Miao Luo two paces backward. When had her swordsmanship become so phenomenal?

After the demoness regained her footing, she all of a sudden looked past Fengjiu with a strange smile. In that split second, Fengjiu realized that during their fight, the two of them had moved to within a dozen paces of where Donghua was sitting. Miao Luo was clearly smiling to Donghua. She hadn't time to think by the time her body had already reacted as she plunged to the back. This time, sure enough, the five red damask sashes flew at Donghua like five electric serpents.

Fengjiu shielded Donghua's body as the two of them were thrown several meters off. Instantly, the seat where he sat was obliterated by the red damask sashes. She sweated cold sweat and thought to herself how dangerous it had been. While pressing against Donghua, she realized why he hadn't jumped in to help her throughout this time. It was likely because he was placed under the demoness's sorcery and couldn't move.

Fortunately for him, she was feeling kindhearted today and decided to stay and help him. She didn't know what would happen to him otherwise. She was always sympathetic toward the wretched. Thinking that Donghua rarely fell into such dilemma, she gently returned his gaze without feeling any abashment looking into his eyes. Her heart for some reason was brimming with sympathy... Really, she had misunderstood him a bit too

much all this while. Donghua Dijun hadn't done a thing entirely because he wanted to see how far she could actually go to save him.

The damask sashes were wielded by Miao Luo like a living thing. Not hitting its target, it immediately changed direction and rushed toward the two of them again. If that bundle of electricity were to hit her, she'd certainly vomit blood. It was quite easy to duck by herself, but to take the paralyzed Donghua along... While she was contemplating this difficult decision, she felt her body being rolled along on the ground to dodge the sashes' attacks. Before she could waste her own energy, she was already lifted up by the wind. Her sword-holding hand was held by another, and so was her waist. Donghua spoke to her in a low voice from behind: "Look closely." She widened her eyes as her body moved forward, the lustrous blade surging like swirling snow. She couldn't see where Donghua was taking her, or what move he was using with her Taozhu sword. When her vision returned, the only things she saw were fragments of red damask flying in the sky. The blade's shiny end was bleeding, pierced in the center of a wide-eyed Miao Luo's forehead.

Fengjiu had always deemed herself an experienced immortal. Although she hadn't demolished many demons herself, she had witnessed her uncles and aunt many times throughout the years. She hadn't seen any demon as wicked as Miao Luo, yet Dijun demolished her cleanly with only one strike of the sword. She suddenly felt a new-found admiration for his capability.

Donghua extracted the Taozhu sword and returned it to its scabbard. Fuling petals scattered in the forest like falling snowflakes. They drifted further and further away until they completely vanished. From time to time, a few fell onto her hand, but she couldn't feel them. She then realized the phantom sea of flowers she saw was merely an illusion created by the demon.

Wind screeched loudly in the dense forest. Smoke started to rise from Miao Luo's feet - it was a sign of her impending death. Her spurned eyes dilated wide as she faced Donghua smirkingly. "I've always heard of Your Grace's unparalleled tranquility in all the realms. I've long wanted to

know if your heart is truly as placid as they say it is. My wish was at last granted.” Her cold eyes flickered a shrewd flash as if she had seen a laughable joke. “I didn't know Your Grace's weakness is a sea of Fuling flowers. How interesting, how interesting indeed! I wonder if what you keep in your heart is this flower sea, or a certain someone hidden inside it?”

She cackled twice more: “The most powerful deity in the world, the so called saint who has reached single-mindedness in the nine mental abidings having this shocking of a secret... Interesting, interesting, int...” She hadn't completed her last word when it dissolved along with her body into smoky thin air.

Fengjiu stared wide-eyed at Miao Luo's last words and stared wide-eyed again as she watched the demoness evaporate into thin smoke. She thought this was going to be a once-in-a-lifetime battle. Donghua couldn't help her, but demolishing a monster wasn't an everyday opportunity. Her excitement had only just begun to fuel, but... had everything already ended?

The dissipating smoke gave way to a breezy moonlit sky. Fengjiu was getting suspicious. Only a second ago, Donghua was sitting like a wooden statue. How could he come in at that critical moment with such calm? Had he fooled her again? She silently admired her calm acceptance of this fact. She'd been fooled so many times she was growing accustomed to it. Fengjiu carelessly shortened her sword down to the length of her palm and buried it back into her sleeve. Then, she casually turned around and cast a goodbye nod toward Donghua. Why did she stay just to be righteous when she knew she wasn't good enough? Now he was going to laugh at her again. Never mind, she'd be the bigger person this time and gift this act of honor to him for free.

As she stepped away under that breezy clear sky, Donghua asked her in his unhurried way, “Why have you come here?”

This question sounded a little familiar. Fengjiu tilted her head awhile, then skeptically pointed to herself and responded, “You were asking me?”

The moon began to hide itself behind the clouds. Dijun simply looked back at her: "Do I look like I'm talking to myself?"

Fengjiu kept the surprise look on her face and pointed to herself again. "I meant that when I fell from the tree and you asked Princess Jiheng, 'Why did you come here?' you actually intended the question for me?"

Donghua waved his hand and conjured up a low, long divan. He sat down and raised his head to her questioningly. "If not, then who do you think I was asking?" Upon seeing her confused look, he repeated, "You still haven't answered me. Why did you come here?"

Donghua's repeated question sparked a memory in her chaotic mind. She was supposed to steal the Saha fruit tonight, but she had somehow gotten excited once she had drawn her sword, and in the end forgot her original purpose. She suddenly perspired at the thought of the amount of time she had lost. She replied him perfunctorily, "I just happened to be taking a walk. When I saw that you were bullied, I just happened to help you out again. Little did I know I was being fooled." She picked up her pace and walked away.

Donghua's voice unhurriedly carried on behind her: "You're leaving without taking me along?"

Fengjiu turned around. "Why should I take you along?" Donghua didn't follow her. Instead, he leisurely remained on his divan. When he saw her turn around, he casually answered, "I'm injured. Can you leave me here and be at ease?"

"Yes," Fengjiu nodded candidly. "Very much so," she impetuously added when she saw Donghua's raised brow. At this time, her forward-marching feet for some reason started to stumble backwards on their own. Before long, she was brought next to the divan where Donghua was leisurely lounging on. She held onto the bedframe in annoyance.

"You..."

"It seems you're not *that* at ease."

Fengjiu couldn't utter one word. Dijun's mastery of shamelessness had gotten even better in the few days they hadn't seen each other. She reined her temper in with what rationality she still had left and softened her tone. "Pardon me for my ignorance. You seem so comfortable, I really can't see where exactly your royal body is injured."

A soft breeze fluttered the sleeve of Donghua's robe. There was indeed a long gash on his right arm where warm blood was now gushing from. It wasn't there a moment ago, perhaps it had been covered by the garment's dark hue. She was told Donghua had never bled since the day he reigned the universe. It was a rarity to be able to see him bleed from an injury like this. She stepped closer to him and remarked in excitement, "There's a gold pigment in the red color, how appropriate for being Your Majesty's blood. From what I read, a bowl of this blood is worth 1800 years of immortal cultivation. I wonder if this is true?"

Donghua raised a brow at her and let out a sigh. "Normally in this scenario, your first thought should be on how to stop my bleeding."

Fengjiu's excitement hadn't receded. She quickly replied, "Even though I'm not considered a beauty yet, give me another ten thousand years and I'll definitely acquire that status. Among my aunt's stack of screenplays, none has said the hero would intentionally show his weakness to the beauty after rescuing her. You must have an ulterior motive in showing me your wound. It isn't as if this is the first time you've lied to me. I bet this injury is merely an eye-masking sorcery; do you think I'm stupid?"

Donghua gazed to his wound, then back at Fengjiu. After a second, he softened his voice: "You *are* getting smarter these days. Except your childhood teacher never taught you the most basic lesson in sorcery. Eye-masking magic involving blood can only fool humans; it cannot fool the immortals."

Fengjiu had never heard Donghua speak this much. His words sort of made sense. She staggered back in momentary fright. "... Then, this wound is real?" She stepped forward again skeptically. Blood was indeed still dizzyingly gushing out. She promptly tore off a piece of her skirt to

stop the flow as she doubtfully murmured, "But there are many heroes I know, my uncle-in-law for example, no matter how grave his injuries are, he always tries his best to hide them from my aunt. My father, too, never lets Mother know of his injuries. Even the flamboyant Zheyang quietly hides from little uncle whenever he gets hurt. But your action is something I've never quite encountered."

Donghua casually watched her as she clumsily wrapped his wound and patiently explained to her: "Ah, that's because compared to them, I'm a weak hero."

"..."

At this time, Fengjiu sat on the divan Donghua had sat on a minute ago. She rested her right hand on the bed frame as she endured the weight of Dijun's head. In other words, Donghua was presently resting his head on her precious lap. How did things turn out this way? Fengjiu had scratched her head for half a day and still didn't quite know.

In half a teacup's time, she had repaid Donghua's misdeed with kindness. After she had bandaged his arm, she bid him goodbye and left for her own affairs. Donghua didn't keep her this time. When she followed the path in her memory to go back, however, she couldn't find the spot where she first fell to. Her acumen served her well in this time of need as she realized Donghua must've had something to do with this. She furiously turned back to look for him. Before she reached the reposing King, he had already said to her, "I forgot to tell you. Twelve hours after the demon perished, this place would automatically lock up. I'm afraid you won't be able to leave."

As Fengjiu stood bewildered, Donghua continued: "You have something important to attend to?"

Fengjiu replied miserably, "I have a previous engagement with Yan Chiwu..." As she was about to add 'to go to Jieyou Stream and steal the Saha fruit', she at once caught herself and said instead, "... for something."

A moment ago, she had wondered whether she had been too nice to Donghua, but now her goodness proved to be a sort of luck. Instead of taking advantage of his affliction, she even helped bandage his injury. In only a couple of steps, she rushed to Donghua's side and held his injured arm up to show him the proof of her kindness, earnestly asking him, "Dijun, don't you think I've dressed your wound rather well? Don't you think you owe me one this time and that you should repay the favor?"

He fixed his gaze on her. "There's nothing special about this bandaging. How do you want me to repay you?"

She held onto his arm even tighter. "It's really simple. There's a life-and-death matter I must go to. This place can trap a crummy fairy like myself, but it certainly cannot keep someone as great as you. If you will help me get out of here, I'll forget both the times you left me in Fanyin Valley for six months and when you pretended to turn into the silk handkerchief. What do you think?"

Donghua continued to gaze at her with his piercing eyes. "Why do I have a feeling that you hold an especially long grudge against me?"

How patient she could be sometimes in important situations. Even when Donghua's gaze was boring down on her like this, she felt no major perturbation. "How can that be?" she replied as sincerely as she could. Receiving no reaction from Donghua, she paused then added: "It's because you're the only one who always aggravates me."

"How about Yan Chiwu?" she heard Donghua ask.

Xiao Yan was pretty stupid, Fengjiu thought to herself. He was lucky she didn't bully him. It'd be the world's biggest phenomenon since the creation of Heaven and Earth if he were to dare harass her. Nonetheless, Xiao Yan was still a lord of the Demon Clan. As friends, she shouldn't humiliate him. "Xiao Yan? Er, Xiao Yan's pretty nice," she answered vaguely.

But that sort of vague answer had sounded half-hearted at best. When Donghua remained quiet and closed his eyes to rest, Fengjiu thought she had trailed off topic. She quickly returned to the matter at hand: "Let's

place aside whether or not I hold a grudge for now. This attitude of yours, are you going to help me or not?"

Donghua remained close-eyed, his eyelashes casting a lush shadow. At long last, he retorted, "Why should I help you leave so you can go see Yan Chiwu?"

He was trying to pick a fight with her, she was sure. But she knew Donghua had always preferred malleability over rigidity. She suppressed her anxiety and replied ever so eloquently, "I helped you out because we are fellow fairies. Since I've helped you, you should help me back. That's the way of the honorable." If he was going to reply in his unreasonable way and say something such as: 'I don't feel honorable today. I don't want to help you,' she would so claw him for his trouble. Unexpectedly, Donghua opened his eyes and fixed them on her awhile. Then he flatly told her, "I have no way of taking you out of here. It doesn't matter how urgent your date with Yan Chiwu is, you'll have to wait another twelve hours."

Fengjiu's head exploded. "Then I'll definitely miss our appointment?" She placed all her hopes on Donghua's almighty powers. She didn't think she'd really be stuck here and lose her time at stealing the Saha fruit. Donghua didn't look as if he was joking either. He said nothing more afterward.

Fengjiu sat stumped for a spell. When she gazed up, the starry sky no longer held any moonlight. The forest leaves rustled in the wind. If she lost her chances today, she'd have to wait until April 15th, which was one whole month from now. Fengjiu tiredly slid down from the low divan and slumped onto the ground. The bright starlit sky suddenly began to pour. She started and jumped back onto the bed. Like a curtain of continuous pearl strands, heavy rain enveloped the thick forest. In this dark night, it had seemed as though a spiteful hand was pouring water straight from the Heavenly Stream down onto them. The divan was the only dry shelter free from the rainfall.

She had heard that when powerful demons were demolished, sometimes it was easy for the lingering foul energy in the air to gather again. It was thus

necessary to wash every trace of foulness with rainwater for forty-nine hours. Only then can the extermination be completed. This rain, then, was likely summoned by Donghua.

Night rain always brought about sentimentality. What was that *'Quiet thoughts by the lantern light, raindrops bring sorrow in the night'*³⁴ and the like, as all descriptions often were. The rain heightened Fengjiu's own sadness. While Donghua seemed as though he was lying idly, she knew he was actually using the rainwater to wash away lingering foulness from Miao Luo. This was why he had made a bed, to keep dry and to rest knowing he would be stuck for an amount of time. Donghua was always meticulous.

Fengjiu dolefully sat on the bed and accepted she had lost her duck due to this rain. She was so sure the Saha fruit would be hers tonight, but somehow this had to happen. Fate was really inescapable. In any case, it was she who pulled Xiao Yan along, was he going to fall for it again on the next full moon? It gave her a headache just thinking about this.

Fengjiu began to think up possible excuses so that Xiao Yan wouldn't be mad at her. She couldn't tell him the truth. He already hated Donghua so much, but instead of stabbing Donghua a couple of times in his stead, she left him to rescue Donghua. This was akin to betraying their friendship. Arrh. Should she tell him she was lost in the valley's forbidden land and was held captive by a monster for the entire night? This story was fairly sound, except if she was going to go with such pretext, she'd need to fabricate another lie about how she eventually escaped. This part was slightly more problematic. Then unwittingly, she babbled out loud, "None of these excuses is going to work. Scamming is an art in itself, especially if I'm going to scam Xiao Yan, who always picks flight over fight. Arrh." Donghua's eyes remained closed; he seemed to have no reaction, but the downpour became heavier all of a sudden. It hammered down on the forest like a frightening army. Fengjiu started and nudged over toward

³⁴ These are lines from 長沙紫極宮雨夜愁坐 *Sitting Melancholically on a Rainy Night at Changsha's Ziji Temple*, a Li Qun'yu poem in the late Tang period.

Donghua. She felt calmer when her feet reached Donghua's leg. At this time the King suddenly spoke: "I didn't know you are this worried for Yan Chiwu."

Dijun had a way of saying perplexing things. She knew his ambiguous speaking style, but shouldn't he in this instant at least say something like 'Scamming people requires careful thoughts. It seems you should work harder at raising your intelligence' or the likes? Momentarily not knowing what to say, Fengjiu for some reason blurted, "I'm worried Xiao Yan won't help me steal the Saha fruit on next month's full moon..." The moment her words left her mouth, her face turned pale as she hastened to correct herself: "Actually, what I mean..."

The rain softened considerably. Raindrops flowed down the clear wall of the force field. Behind the water cascade was a hazy image of Dijun leisurely lounging on the divan, his long silver hair spilled on the bed like yards of satiny silk. Fengjiu blankly watched Dijun's reflection on the force field's wall. Stealing wasn't a proud exercise to begin with. On top of that, she was shouldering Qingqiu's reputation as the kingdom's sovereign. If Donghua repeated this story to the Biyinia Queen, or worse yet, her parents, she'd be as good as dead. She opened her mouth wanting to say a couple of salvaging lines but her wit was failing her in the most dire situation. Finally, Donghua spoke first. His voice was noticeably gentler: "You're meeting Yan Chiwu tonight so you can steal the Saha fruit?" Fengjiu laughed nervously and shifted toward the back of the bed. "No, no, absolutely not. How can I, as the queen of Qingqiu, do something as disgraceful as stealing? Haha, you heard wrong..."

Donghua clutched his head and sat up. Fengjiu anxiously watched him rub his temple as he continued in the same gentle voice: "Ah, I might have misheard then. I have a slight headache, can you let me lean on you?" Her hair braid was being fondled. Donghua's every move stirred the heartstrings inside her. She at once offered graciously: "It won't be comfortable leaning on me. Let me conjure up a cushion for you..." Her thoughtfulness was targeted wrongly. Donghua started to rub his temple

again. "Something is coming back to me, did you say at next month's full moon..." Quickly understood, she promptly scooted over, held his head, and pressed it onto her lap. "Are you comfortable like this? Or should I lie down for you to rest on? Would you be more comfortable if I lie face up or face down?" Once he was comfortable with a position on her lap, he opened his eyes and said, "Are you more comfortable sitting or lying?" Fengjiu imagined lying down for a second, if they were to lie down... "Sitting is more comfortable," she swiftly said. Donghua closed his eyes again. "Then let's do that."

Watching a sleeping Donghua, Fengjiu recalled the days when she had also once liked sleeping on his lap as a baby fox. In those days when Fuling petals fell on her head, Donghua would brush them away for her. Afterward he'd even stroke her soft fluffy fur. At those times, she would take her chance to lick his hand back... she let out a sigh as the memories halted to a stop. How funny life worked out, it was now his turn to rest on her lap. If Donghua kept lying this way for twelve more hours... she'd have to buy some medicine to treat her numbness.

Lost in her own wandering thoughts, it was Donghua's voice that brought her back: "My hand is feeling cold, likely from the loss of blood. Since you don't have anything to do, do you mind keeping me warm?" Fengjiu stared at his raised hand for a long time before she replied, "Men and women should keep their distance..." Donghua idly mused: "After tonight, I plan to meet the Biyiniaoy Queen and ask her how to grow the Saha fruit. Do you think I should..." Fengjiu at once took his right hand that was supposedly growing cold from the loss of blood and said in all seriousness, "Distance smishtance. That's the silliest rule the moralists ever came up with."

She took his hand and held it with care. "Are Your Majesty pleased with the warmth I'm giving your hand?" Dijun was naturally well pleased. He serenely closed his eyes again. "I'm a bit tired, I want to sleep. Make yourself comfortable." How in the world was she supposed to be comfortable in this situation? Was he telling her to push his precious head

and hand to the ground? As his breathing became more even, she couldn't help herself and bent down to make a face at him, mumbling all the while, "You only sat there watching in amusement from beginning to end, and you have the nerves to say you're tired and sleepy? I'm battle-torn but I still have to serve you. *I'm* more exhausted!" She only dared to whisper her words. He didn't see her, he didn't hear her, but it was enough to release her frustration. Incidentally, her stray hair hung loose and grazed his ears. Before she could raise her head, Donghua suddenly opened his eyes. He looked at her for a length of time with a smile in his eyes. "Did you say I was only sitting by to watch?" He paused and watched her innocent face. "What do you mean I only sat to watch? I clearly sat by and very seriously..." With nary a trace of pudency, he capped off his sentence: "cheered you on."

"..."

The next morning when Fengjiu roused from her dream and recalled the events of the previous night, there were three questions she could not answer.

First, the wound on Donghua's right hand had come about too suspiciously. She didn't believe it had occurred because she had fallen on him as a result of Miao Luo's attack. She could still remember he had held her tightly in his arm, and the action with which the blade had stabbed through Miao Luo had been decisively swift. There was nothing which had seemed out of the ordinary.

Second, Donghua's attitude toward her had always been puzzling, but since she was too occupied with the situation at hand, she didn't have time to think about it. Honestly speaking, it was wholly within reason to believe that because Dijun must absolutely stay for twelve hours to purge the monster's foul spirit, he didn't mind sacrificing his own arm to keep her with him so that he wouldn't become bored. But was the bored King that absurd? Alright, so he was definitely a very bored, and very absurd sort of person no matter how one looked at him. But could he really be *that*

bored? *That* absurd? She shouldn't think so poorly of Dijun this way. After a bit more mulling, she dropped the matter altogether. In reality, her rationalization was entirely correct...

The third question: Fengjiu recognized right away her familiar bed and soft quilt at Jifeng Yuan. On a corner of the quilt were several embroidered peonies which she had butchered into daisies when she was practicing her stitching the other night. She remembered falling asleep to the lingering sound of residual rain along with Donghua's even breathing. Behind that curtain of rain, the sky had been lit with stars. She had felt warm because she was forced to hold Donghua's hand. His body had also emitted warmth. She had gradually lowered herself onto his precious head and fell asleep. She clearly remembered leaning against Donghua's divan. She was cold at first, but it became warmer and warmer as her sleep went on. For that reason, she slept soundly and remained dormant for an unknown length of time. But why did she wake up in her own room at this moment?

Bundled in her blanket, she wondered if everything had been but a Huangliang dream³⁵. It was the 15th, and she had gone out for drinks with Meng Shao and Xiao Yan. The girls were beautiful, the wine intoxicating, and she had been knocked out until now. Because of her rich imagination, she was able to dream up such a realistic dream. This was a possibility. As she was about to step down to go wash her face, Xiao Yan lifted the curtain and walked in.

Fengjiu couldn't control her eyes from twitching. Xiao Yan's outfit was very unique today. On top, his silk shirt was red; on bottom, his shiny trousers were barley green. Draped on his shoulder was a shawl just as glossy and green as his trousers. He looked exactly like a giant carrot freshly pulled out from the snow.

³⁵黄粱一梦 Huangliang Yi Meng – lit. A Golden Millet Dream, similar to a pipe dream. Comes from an anecdote wherein a poor scholar went to sleep and dreamed of a successful life but when he woke up, the yellow millet that had been cooking since he started his sleep was still cooking on the stove, and he was still as poor as ever.

The giant carrot woefully looked at Fengjiu. "Someone took a liking to this compound and told me to move out. I've already packed. I came to say goodbye to you. Time is boundless, I'll come to visit when I'm free."

Fengjiu didn't know what was going on. "Are you still sleeping or am I still sleeping?"

The carrot swiftly zoomed toward Fengjiu but stopped three paces short of reaching her. "I can't come any closer to you. The thing is..." His voice suddenly rose high as he begged to her, "Don't go back to sleep, listen to me first!"

Fengjiu listened haphazardly, and as it turned out, everything hadn't been a dream. In Xiao Yan's words, he got lost last night half way into his exploration. By the time he returned, Fengjiu was nowhere to be found. He worriedly searched for her through the night without any result. When he tiredly came back to Jifeng Yuan, he was surprised to find a little scarlet fox sleeping soundly on her bed. His sworn enemy Donghua Dijun was sitting in a trance watching the sleeping fox. Such a trance it was, he didn't even notice Xiao Yan had come near. Xiao Yan had thought it rather peculiar, so when Donghua had briefly left the room, he'd taken his chance to sneak in. At this point, Xiao Yan became somewhat emotional. He said he didn't know the scarlet fox on the bed was Fengjiu. He thought it was a new rare animal Donghua had captured on a hunt. It was so adorable that he couldn't help himself and went to cuddle the animal. That was when tragedy fell.

Fengjiu took a look at the carrot's bandaged hand which resembled a pig trotter and laughed, "Did I breathe a fireball and burn your hand in my sleep? I told you I'm pretty wicked."

"No, not at all," the carrot told her. "Ice Face came out of nowhere and stood leaning against the doorway. I hadn't time to react by the time my hands were already turned into this. I couldn't hold you anymore because of my condition so I dropped you back onto the bed. But surprisingly you didn't wake from the drop at all. Then I woefully discovered that I couldn't come any closer than three paces from your bed. I was going to retaliate

when Ice Face suddenly asked me if I'm living with you, and for how long have we lived together."

Fengjiu scratched her head and explained to the carrot, "It's like this. On cold days when I fall asleep, I'd unconsciously turn back into my original form. In that form, I don't feel cold and it's easier to sleep. But what did Dijun mean...?"

"I don't know either. But basically I don't remember for how long we've lived at this place. Because I don't remember, I told him six months or thereabout. I was occupied with trying to recall the exact length of time we've lived together so I didn't pay attention to him. By the time I turned around, he had used the paralysis spell on me. He frowned and looked at me for a long time, then out of nowhere said he liked me."

Fengjiu fell over and slammed her head against the bed frame. The person who still hadn't realized he had uttered a lethal incomplete sentence went on to complain: "Out of nowhere said he liked my garden house." Then he stopped and looked at Fengjiu in surprise. "How did you bump your head? Doesn't it hurt? Whoa, what a big bun!"

Fengjiu waved her hands to signal for him to continue. Xiao Yan concernedly went on: "Massage that bun. You have to rub it so blood doesn't clot there. Oh, the fact that he likes my living arrangements? That's it."

"That's it?"

"He said our residence is closer to the school while his is too far from it. Ours has a fishing pond while his doesn't. Ours has you who can cook while his doesn't. So he wants to trade places with me. Since I'm the obliging selfless type, I agreed. I'm here to say goodbye after packing my things. Even though I'll miss you, don't we immortals derive happiness from helping others?"

Fengjiu was honest in her reply. "I have indeed heard a fairy derives happiness from helping others, but I've never heard a demon derives happiness from the same thing." She paused. "You easily traded places

with Dijun because you know ever since he arrived at Fanyin Gu, the Biyinia Queen especially instructed Jiheng to serve him at his place. Isn't that your true motive?"

The giant carrot couldn't hide his amazement for Fengjiu. He rubbed his nose. "This... okay... you're right. If I succeed, I'll invite you to our wedding as a special guest." He thought a bit more and added: "And I won't ask for congratulatory money either."

Fengjiu's head started to ache. She waved her hand: "... Alright, I understand everything now. Since we failed this time, I'll move our date to the 15th of next month. You'll come, right?"

Xiao Yan nodded as he went to the door. Then he abruptly turned his head and solemnly said, "There's something else. I'm very sorry to have taken advantage and held you in your original form. As friends, I should never take advantage of you in such situation. When you want, just say the word and I'll let you take advantage of me back."

Fengjiu massaged her bump. "... No need."

Xiao Yan insisted on compensating his good sister. He gently told her in all seriousness, "You don't have to be mindful of me. If I took advantage of you, then just take it right back. My memory is bad, if I forget in one or two days, you'd be losing out. Hey, maybe you should take advantage of me twice. We should count interest for the time which had passed."

"Leave!"

Outside the window under the morning light was a vast haziness. Fengjiu hugged her quilt tightly as she sat absentmindedly for a while. She saw out the window in the snow a Japanese Cinnamon tree sticking out oddly with its radiating green color. She couldn't help but linger her eyes on it a while longer.

Snow descended in Fanyin Valley all four seasons. Occasionally when there was a clear sky, the snowy scenery still looked nebulous in the

sunlight. After half a year of looking at this landscape, Fengjiu fairly missed the turbulent world outside. Meng Shao told her that more than two hundred years ago, Fanyin Valley had also once had four different seasons. This year-round snowfall was only a recent phenomenon of the recent two hundred years. And if they were to speak of this phenomenon, they'd have to speak of the Biyiniaio Clan's famous Archmage Chen Ye who had sought seclusion for many years past.

It was said this Archmage for reasons unknown had locked himself at home one day, placed the three seasons into his sword, and stored it away inside his sleeve. He had not left his residence in the many years henceforth. Ever since, Fanyin Valley was deprived of spring, summer, and fall.

Meng Shao vaguely mentioned that Chen Ye's action was to mourn the departure of Aranya³⁶. After she left, the Queen forbade the mentioning of her name in the kingdom. Some had said when Aranya was still among them, she was especially fond of spring, summer, and fall as they were full of life. When Chen Ye took those three seasons away, he wanted to remind the entire kingdom that even without uttering the name Aranya again, they would never be able to forget her.

After barely a few words, Meng Shao suddenly shushed up as if he was saying what he wasn't supposed to. Enjoying her wine, Fengjiu had been listening with delight and was curious as to what sort of person Aranya was, but no matter what, Meng Shao would not continue and she didn't ask any further.

At this time as she watched the bleak whiteness outside, Fengjiu suddenly recalled the story she had heard six months ago. But today, Fengjiu was no longer interested in the ups and downs of Chen Ye and Aranya's tale. She only felt a sense of loss. Had the cold winter been Aranya's favorite season that year, the valley would be able to keep spring, summer, and fall, and

³⁶ 阿蘭若 Alanre/Aranya is a Sanskrit name which means 'belonging to the wilderness.' I should also mention that Fanyin Valley means Sanskrit Valley.

everyone wouldn't have to suffer through this. Someone sneezed at this point in her train of thoughts. She looked up and detected a corner of purple fabric among the desolate snowfall.

Stunned for a moment, Fengjiu craned her neck and stared past the Japanese Cinnamon beyond the windowpanes. Donghua was sitting across from the fishing pond by himself. He sat on a broken folding chair made of Jujube wood, and Fengjiu was amazed at how he could remain looking so regal. How befitting for a King. But in her memory, he used to recline in the sun or entertain himself with a couple of sutras whenever he went fishing in the past. This time, however, he was gazing deep into the water surface as if his entire soul was placed into that fishing rod.

Fengjiu admired him from afar. He had seemed to be preoccupied. Even his pensive look, objectively, was devastatingly gorgeous.

Why did the King suddenly want to trade sleeping quarters with Yan Chiwu? What did Xiao Yan say a second ago? Did he say the King thought Jifeng Yuan was closer to the school, had good scenery, had a fishing pond, and a good cook? If Xiao Yan hadn't reminded her beforehand, she might have believed Dijun's rubbish this time. Luckily, Xiao Yan had forewarned her. These were merely the long-winded turns in love. She furrowed her brow. Was this another tactic used to upset Jiheng?

Donghua agreed for Jiheng and Xiao Yan to be friends, but he must've been bothered when they really became close. The first time Donghua saved her and brought her back to his bed had been his first retaliation against Jiheng. Unfortunately, she had ruined it for him. During Miao Luo's eradication, Jiheng was also present. Donghua had tried to upset her again, but she had ran away in jealousy. Donghua had seemed to be pleased with this, because after Jiheng ran away and she stayed to help him, he had seemed to be in a good mood when she later helped him fall asleep. Then, switching residences with Xiao Yan must be the third act of the play. When Jiheng couldn't take it anymore and came to him full of tears, he'd whip out a marriage license and the two would be reconciled.

By then, even if Siming had carved Jiheng and Xiao Yan's destiny in stone, the pair of them would never be able to work.

After Fengjiu recognized these intricacies, she suddenly realized Dijun was too complicated a person. At the same time, she really was becoming wiser these days for her to be able to see such complexities. But after praising herself, she felt an inexplicable paralysis; a deep sense of emptiness followed. In her mind, Donghua was in fact very dedicated when Jiheng was concerned.

Drafty wind entered through the window cracks. After a sneeze, she remembered there was a cloak on the side of the bed. She draped it over her shoulders and stepped down from her bed. A murmur suddenly sounded from the other side: "If Zhonglin was here, the tea would be brewed already."

Fengjiu looked in surprise in the direction of this voice. There Donghua was, opening the cover and looking inside the empty teapot. She had no idea when he had entered her room, but it certainly took some mental fortitude in order to casually waltz into someone else's room like this.

She watched him for half a day. After going through the Miao Luo incident, she had wanted to distance herself from him, but she couldn't find that distant feeling even for half a second. Her words hadn't come forth when she choked them back. "Then why didn't you bring Zhonglin when you came to the valley?"

Donghua set the empty teapot down. "Why should I bring him when you're here?"

Fengjiu pressed down on the bulging veins on her temple. "Why can't you bring him if I'm here?"

"I can't trouble you if he's here," he answered ever so naturally.

Fengjiu wanted to retort, "So without him you'd have no qualms bothering me?" but in her hastiness, it got changed to: "Why will you have any qualms bothering me if he comes?"

Donghua looked at her and nodded. "You're right. I can still bother you even if he's here." He lifted the fish creel on the table and smoothly handed it to her. "Will you make some food?"

After a length of time, Fengjiu finally realized what she said and what Donghua said in reply. A massive migraine kicked in. She massaged her temple and looked into the basket. "I feel that you're too thick-skinned sometimes."

The King's face remained utterly tranquil. "Your feelings are very accurate." He pushed the creel toward her again. "Steam this, alright?"

She looked inside the basket. A crucian carp suddenly jumped up, but hit the opening and fell back down. She swiftly backed away. "You mean... kill it?"

Donghua glanced at the fish that was jumping inside the basket. "Do I look like I want you to free it?"³⁷

"I thought immortals from Jiuchongtian don't kill," Fengjiu lamented.

"You've misunderstood us too much." When he received no response from her, he quietly gazed to the distance. Then he suddenly said, "I still vaguely remember the other night you said on the fifteenth of next month..."

Fengjiu jolted, her sleepiness instantly dissipated away. She interrupted Donghua: "No, no, you've confused it with your dreams. I didn't say anything and you didn't hear anything." Fengjiu saw the secret in Donghua's eyes. She looked down to the bamboo creel in her hands and hastily said, "It's certainly an honor to cook for Your Majesty. I've always wanted to cook for you but I never had the chance. How would you like your steamed fish? It's important to know there are many ways to steam a fish. Should I make peony blossom cuts on the fish, or the thinner

³⁷ They're speaking of the two common Buddhist concepts of 殺生 sasheng and 放生 fangsheng. One is when you kill living things, the other is when you free/salvage their lives.

magnolia slices? Then fill the cuts with shiitake mushrooms and steam it? Or if you like shiitakes, I can stuff them directly into the fish.” In the past when they lived in Taichen Palace, she had nothing to compete with Jiheng. Truthfully, she had always wanted to display her cooking skill but never had the chance to.

The carp inside thrashed about and caused the basket to slip from Jengjiu's hand. Luckily, Donghua grabbed it in time. Chill pricked her hand as she realized he was holding it. His voice sounded above her head: “Have you got it?” He paused, then said, “Make the first dish today, the second tomorrow, then maybe one with garlic sauce the day after.”

Why are you thinking so far ahead, Fengjiu thought. Her gaze landed on Donghua's wrist and saw that his sleeve was stained with blood. She held onto the creel and nodded her chin towards him. “What's wrong with your hand?”

Donghua's eyes flickered; he didn't seem to think that she would notice this. He gently replied, “My wound reopened when I carried you home.” Then he proceeded to study her face.

“You're being absurd, I'm not that heavy!” Fengjiu protested.

Dijun remained quiet for a second, then told her, “I think what you should be concerned about is my injured hand, not your bodyweight.”

With the fish creel in her hand, she stepped in for a closer look. “Oh, then why is your hand so weak?”

“...Because you're too heavy.”

Fengjiu's temper flared. “But that's absurd, when am I ever heavy?” This sounded exceptionally familiar, as if she was circling back to the previous argument. While she was busy mulling over this, Donghua suddenly raised his hand. She quickly ducked to the side. “I never raise my hand when I lose an argument against you. So when you lose an argument against me, you can't raise your hand either.” His hand lowered and dropped onto her head. Her hair follicles pricked where his hand was

placed. The room suddenly went still. They could even hear the sound of snow falling to the ground from the Japanese Cinnamon tree. Her entire being fell into confusion. What opera was Dijun reenacting now? She carefully lifted her eyes and caught his calm patient gaze. "There's a tangled lock. Xiao Bai, didn't you comb your hair when you woke up?"

The conversation veered too quickly. This was the second time he called her Xiao Bai. Fengjiu's face reddened as she stammered, "Y...you... don't know anything. It's the fashion this year." She took the fish basket and fled the room. Thick snow blanketed the vast courtyard. Fengjiu touched her burning face as she ran and wondered why she should blush and stammer. It couldn't be because Donghua called her Xiao Bai, could it? Was it because she wasn't happy with her name and liked the way Donghua called her? She was too sentimental and soft-hearted, she decided. What was she going to do when people take advantage of her?



Chapter 11

Three days later.

Snow among endless snow. There were chirpings of birds, but one could not smell the scent of fresh blooms.

For a large sum of money, Fengjiu booked the entire Zuilixian and hired the new prettily rouged dancers in order to invite Donghua out for drinks. In reality, she knew Donghua probably preferred tea, but within the entire imperial city, there was not a teahouse as comparably luxurious as the Zuilixian restaurant. Xiao Yan suggested that since she was hosting guests, she might take care to show her sincerity adequately. She was made dizzy by Xiao Yan's ramblings and in a muddled state, decided on Zuilixian.

Why did Fengjiu invite Donghua for drinks? The origin went back to two days ago. Two days ago, her mind was still occupied with how to obtain the Saha fruit. She waited on Donghua day in and day out, then coupled with sleepiness, she fumbled her way to class and almost ran head-on into her teacher who was rushing toward her.

Because she was still sleepy and wasn't in the mood to deal with him, she bowed her head and stepped to the side. Her teacher bee-lined for her, however, on his face appeared a layered kind smile, his outstandingly small eyes curved into slits. Fengjiu shuddered. Her sleepiness instantly dissipated. Her teacher hunched over as he told her in a cheerful doting voice, "The list of contestants that was posted a few days ago was transcribed by a minor official. I only knew he left your name out when Dijun called it to my attention last night." He stroked his goat beard and smiled cheerfully in an attempt to mollify her. "Forgive me for my poor sight, haha, forgive me for my poor sight."

Fengjiu was overjoyed when she heard her name was now included on the list which meant she still had a chance at the Saha fruit. Then she realized he had said something about Dijun and unabashedly belittled his own eyesight. In a flash, she conceived the reason why she was allowed to join the competition. Her teacher must've misunderstood something again. This was the first time her brain had operated this quickly in the many years she had lived. The teacher was old but his movements were even quicker than her brain. As she looked up and was about to clarify, all she could see was a black silhouette fading away in the rain.

Donghua had helped her. She would've asked him to a meal to show her gratitude had he been someone else. However, ever since they met each other again, Donghua had caused her a number of misfortunes. She wasn't sure if his deeds outweighed his misdeeds, if his misdeeds outweighed his deeds, or if they were about the same. She was unsure throughout the entire class time, then still unsure, finally went to ask Yan Chiwu who was missing from class that day.

The other day Xiao Yan had elatedly waved good bye to her and moved into His Majesty's magnificent residence. As a matter of course, he was able to see Princess Jiheng, the woman of his dream. When Jiheng saw Xiao Yan and learned Donghua had exchanged places with him, she turned to stone for a moment; on her beautiful face appeared two drops of tear. Those two drops of tears crushed Xiao Yan's heart like two heavy boulders. He suddenly sensed that this road he had been traveling on was still leading nowhere.

That night, Xiao Yan brought two wine bottles to the courtyard and drank under the moonlight until midnight. On the last cup, he was suddenly enlightened. When he first found out Fengjiu was the queen of Qingqiu, he was very surprised and could not believe the queen revered by everyone in the East Land and the heir to the Nine-tailed White Fox clan had been like such. But at this time, he realized Fengjiu was in reality an incredibly beautiful woman. Now, she was even by Donghua's side day in and day out... of course Xiao Yan himself had also spent entire days with Fengjiu for a long period of time, but he was a faithful person. Someone like Donghua naturally wasn't as faithful as he was. If Donghua and Fengjiu were living together in the same compound... Jiheng's heart had been pained by Donghua this time, if he took his chance to comfort her, he'd succeed for sure!

As for Donghua and Fengjiu – the first time he met her, he had thought she was Donghua's lover, but he paid little attention to her outer beauty then. Afterward when he had noticed her beauty and found out she was the queen of Qingqiu and that she had no relation to Donghua, he hadn't given

much thought whether they were compatible or not. Now in hindsight, they did look well-matched when they were together. This was a delightful discovery to him.

A frigid wind passed by. Xiao Yan suddenly remembered he had been bad-mouthing Donghua all this time in front of Fengjiu. He thought and thought of ways to change Donghua's image in Fengjiu's eyes. He sat until morning when he eventually caught pneumonia, but still couldn't think of anything. The next morning, Fengjiu came to find him on her own to ask for his help on how to deal with Donghua. Lying splayed on his sickbed with runny snots, Yan Chiwu thanked the heavens.

Xiao Yan genuinely wanted to match-make Fengjiu with Donghua, so in reply to her question, he told her contrary to his true feelings: "Ice Face, erm I mean, Donghua, Donghua has always been an upright scrupulous person. Not only is he famous in your fairy land, his fame is even exalted in my Demon clan. Yet he had gone through the back door to make a request from our teacher for you this time. This isn't a small favor, you know. You say that he didn't come to save you for half a year, that he turned into a handkerchief to deceive you, those things are inconsequential. They're nothing compared to this big favor he had bestowed you!" He cursed himself inwardly at this junction. But for their future happiness, he went on: "You should know that for successful men such as ourselves, dignity is more important than our own lives. But Ice Face, erm I mean, Donghua Dijun had sullied our manly dignity for you. Since he was so kind, you must thank him by asking him out for drinks. What's more, this feast has to be at Zuilixian, the most expensive place in the capital. Hire the prettiest dancers too." He looked at Fengjiu with utter seriousness and said, "We should understand the concept of repaying favors. If we pettily hold onto a grudge and don't repay their favor if only because they had wronged us a little in the past, then we are no different from the ignorant beasts who haven't attained divinity."

Fengjiu was thoroughly confused. "Then everything I've told you about how he had bullied me was mere trivial matter? For onlookers, none of it

is significant? So all along, I've made a big deal out of nothing?" She sadly asked herself, "Am I a petty person, then? I don't deserve to be the queen of the East Land, then?"

Xiao Yan inwardly cursed at Ice Face and at himself. He watched Fengjiu's face crumbled as though the world was ending, but upon the thought of Jiheng's beauty and kindness, he gritted his teeth and again persuaded her with all the earnestness he could muster: "Of course it wasn't a big deal. Donghua obviously wanted to befriend you by doing what he did. You should cherish your friendship with such a notable person. All this time, I've misunderstood Donghua so much. Actually, Donghua Dijun is a... hard to find kind soul." How he hated himself right about now.

Fengjiu knitted her brow to mull over this. Xiao Yan gazed to the floating clouds at the end of the sky for a while then laggardly walked away. Three days later, a feast was held at the capital's most extravagant Zuilixian.

It was a thousand-tael feast. The dancers had also cost one thousand taels per song. Underneath each of their soles was a blooming flower made from silver coins. How it ate away at Fengjiu's heart. She didn't have one single coin when she first fell to this valley. After half a year, she had only accumulated a small sum from the meals she cooked for Xiao Yan. Today's dinner had drained away half of her hard-earned savings.

Donghua sat on the upper balcony, absently toying with the wine cup in his hand. He didn't seem interested in the dancers Fengjiu had costly hired. But on his right, Yan Chiwu, who came without being invited, was watching in rapture. Beside him was Princess Jiheng who had also come without being invited. Fengjiu sighed. It was alright to have these two uninvited guests. It wasn't every day that she threw away money so extravagantly, so it might not be bad to have a few extra witnesses. However, His Third Highness, Prince Liansong of Wuji Palace on Jiuchongtian, and her cousin, the little dough Ah Li, who were tapping their fans to the music... why were these two also present? Was she hallucinating or did she not wake from her sleep?

Even though she was the host, she had been the last to arrive. By the time she turned up, her guests had already taken their seats on the second floor. No one else seemed to have cared about Liansong and the dough's presence. As soon as he saw her, Ah Li sprang up and looked at her with innocently worried eyes. Then, he pretended to look around the room once, feigned a sigh, and sat back down.

Fengjiu walked upstairs skeptically and nodded a hello to her guests. Still toying with the cup in his hand, Donghua eyed the seat next to him when he saw her. She understood his meaning, scratched her head awkwardly, then slowly strode to the chair he had pointed out to her and seated herself.

The moment she sat down, the server standing nearby immediately steeped a new pot of tea. On the other side of the white curtain was the fluttering music played by a beautiful woman, its sounds harmonizing like swimming fish in the stream. Sitting opposite from her, Ah Li's adorable round face loomed behind the thin fog of steam.

Fengjiu sipped her tea and felt as if she was floating in a dream. But next to her, Jiheng's steady gaze at Donghua was so very real. She couldn't determine truth from dream. After some consideration, she gave herself a pinch. It didn't hurt. She must be dreaming then, she thought. She pinched herself again. Donghua's voice came from above: "How convenient you choose your pinching spot." Fengjiu looked down at her frozen hand which was placed on Donghua's thigh. She quietly retrieved her hand and dryly laughed: "I was helping to smooth out your wrinkled garment, Your Majesty."

Donghua's eyes surfaced a trace of smile. Fengjiu didn't see too clearly, but because he was willing to let it go, she took a good look at her own thigh and gave herself a hard pinch this time. She hadn't uttered a cry of pain when Liansong Jun suddenly stopped beating to the music and softly smiled to her. "I'm sure Princess Jiu'ge must be very surprised to see me and the little prince. I came to give Donghua the new pills the Elderly Lord just made. Sadly, the little prince happened to have strayed away from his playmate cousin so I took him along to cheer him up. But...", he smiled

secretly at Donghua, "but I might have been late in bring it. You probably don't have a need for it now."

Fengjiu heard the name 'Jiu'ge' from Liansong and realized why they had acted so strangely when she came upstairs. It seemed they knew the Biyiniao Clan resented Qingqiu for having green sceneries so they were helping her to cover up her identity. Liansong didn't normally seem responsible, but he was still quite thoughtful when it truly mattered.

Donghua seemed already bored with the wine cup. He raised his hand and the white jade bottle that had just been in Liansong's hand somehow had transferred into his own. He gave it a swirl and said, "I don't need it now, but I can't speak for the future."

Liansong tapped his fan. "If I knew you were going to be this way, I wouldn't have bothered to be courteous."

Their secretive conversation piqued Fengjiu's curiosity. She was about to crane her neck to see what sort of magical medicine was stored in the white jade bottle in Donghua's hand when the little dough's patience finally ran out after being ignored for so long.

The little dough was wearing a short aquamarine tunic today. When he dashed from his seat to hers, he had seemed like a flash of green smoke.

The little dough looked at his cousin with the saddest eyes. It had only been half a year, the kiddo already learned how to be depressed?! He continued looking at her forlornly for a long while, then pulled from his belt a little pouch. The small pouch in his hand suddenly grew ten-fold, pushing the small lad backward onto the ground. Fengjiu hastily grabbed his hand and pulled him up. When the pouch's mouth gaped open, a flood of bright light radiated as bounteous night pearls came rolling out and over the pouch. Fengjiu gaped in surprise.

Ah Li looked at her fervently. "Miss," he cleared his throat, "how absolutely, stunningly, breathtakingly beautiful you are. I must tell you how much I admire you. I present to you this bag of night pearls as our meeting gift." Fengjiu stumbled as the little dough labored to support her.

He whispered in her ears, "Fengjiu jiejie, I already bet your money away the other day, but I heard it's costly to live here so I brought all my birthday money to help you out. Did I act well?" Fengjiu leaned on him and whispered back, "Very well, very chivalrous."

However, the little dough wasn't the only one who wouldn't sit still today. When Fengjiu had first come upstairs, she was feeling rather sorry if the marble stage and pretty musicians she had costly paid for didn't result in a few good shows. Princess Jiheng did not disappoint as she quickly went around everyone and presented a blue-and-white ware to Dijun.

The moment the cover was lifted, the strong scent assailed Fengjiu's nose. She recognized it as the scent of cod soup cooked in Mulianzi and Changsheng-teng. Jiheng's cooking wasn't nearly as good as hers, but this soup she made seemed passable enough. Fengjiu could remember that Donghua had especially liked this Mulianzi soup. His taste hadn't changed even after all these years.

The room went silent momentarily. The only sound was of the spoon in Jiheng's hand clanking against the vessel. Glancing over, Fengjiu saw Donghua watching Jiheng's hands. On them were noticeable red dots. "Didn't I say you can't touch the Eternal Vines?" Fengjiu stilled her tea-holding hand; on the other side, Liansong Jun softened his fan flapping.

Jiheng's shoulders slightly trembled. At length, she replied, "You still remember I'm allergic to Changsheng-teng." She shyly gazed up and said, "I was worried you're not used to the dishes from Princess Jiuge's place, so I made and brought over some soup today. If Mulianzi doesn't have Changsheng-teng, the soup would lose the flavor you're used to having. I'm alright, as I didn't touch the vines for too long. But seeing that you are worried for me, I'm..."

While she was hesitating on the completion of her sentence, Fengjiu placed her teacup down and cleared her throat. "I'll go check how the food preparation is coming along."

Xiao Yan sadly stood up. "I'll go with you."

A Li looked back and forth then stood up as well. "Me too, I wanna go too."

Donghua's soup-holding hand suspended mid-air. He looked to Fengjiu who was now up from her chair. Her attention was on something that was still inside her sleeve. After digging around for a length of time, she pulled out a lovely package of pastries and gave two pieces to A Li. "Stay here and snack on these. Don't follow and trouble me." Then she turned and offered two more to Xiao Yan. "You too, have some and don't follow me." But she suddenly withdrew her offerings. "Oh, but your health isn't good. You shouldn't eat daikon cakes." And so she gave them to A Li. The dough looked at the daikon cakes in his hand for half a day. He mulled over his options whether he should eat his cakes or go bother Fengjiu. After thinking awhile, he hesitated, "I'll eat these while going with you. Tagging along with you won't affect my eating these cakes."

Fengjiu glared at the dough then shifted her eyes to Xiao Yan who stood by quietly. In her impression, Xiao Yan had always been a hyperactive bunny. It's not often she saw him so silent. She couldn't help but stare at him for a time.

As she looked at him, she noticed he was eyeing the bowl of soup in front of Donghua. Fengjiu suddenly understood. He must really want Jiheng to cook for him like she had for Donghua. He must be feeling both sadness and ire that she hadn't cooked for him. Fengjiu was in fact very in touch with her maternal instinct; after hesitating awhile, she decided she must comfort him. She bent her head and looked for a pack of candies from her sleeve.

But what to do, Xiao Yan wouldn't eat the candies, and she didn't know how else to comfort him. She looked at him and sighed, "I made some daikon, mung bean, red bean, and plum cakes in the morning to snack on rainy days. You don't like mung bean or red bean. Plum cakes 'though you eat, I added ginger which you don't like." Then she sighed again. "Fine, you can come along and trouble me."

Xiao Yan seemed to have cheered up some. "Can't you make the pastries I like?" Then he asked ever more pitifully, "Or do you not remember what I like anymore?"

Xiao Yan had never looked so sad. Fengjiu was clouded with sympathy. She said to him in the affectionate voice one uses for a pet, "Of course I do, frozen plum cakes with licorice flavor." Then she added: "How about we ask for an order of this? Meng Shao said the cook here is very good; it might be to your taste." Xiao Yan replied with lingering gloominess, "Fine, tell them to make some." Then he added, "I've been craving for salty things lately. Let's ask them to add some salt to the licorice. If it doesn't taste good, we can go back to the old recipe. Or they can make egg yolk cakes too, I guess I can try that."

Fengjiu's head was pounding. She would've already choked him on normal days for having these many requests. But since he was currently feeling vulnerable, she put up with him and gritted her teeth: "Alright, I'll tell them to make it salty for you to try." At that very same moment, Jiheng called out in alarm, "Teacher, your soup is spilling!"

Fengjiu looked over and at the same time caught Donghua's chilly eyes. While Jiheng was cleaning up the spill on the table, Donghua with his head slightly raised was staring intently at Fengjiu. His steady eyes unnerved her. The Mulianzi soup was still emitting steam. Lord Liansong coughed in fits to drive away the silence and spoke: "I've heard much about Princess Jiuge's culinary skills. Mung-bean and red-bean cakes are some of my favorites. Will I have the honor of trying your pastries today?"

Fengjiu was starting to get numbed from all the staring from Donghua. What good timing Liansong had. She immediately gave him the last in her package. Instruments resumed their playing and Donghua's gaze was recalled to the performance. Jiheng who was momentarily forgotten suddenly raised her voice: "Teacher, will you have another serving?" Yan Chiwu had left to the staircase and was now signaling with his eyes to urge Fengjiu away. She lifted her skirt and turned to go. As she passed

Donghua, she suddenly heard his soft voice: "You're actually familiar with what he likes."

Fengjiu unconsciously lowered her eyes and caught his gaze again. He seemed so cold. Did she do something wrong again? She considered everything that had happened and, as if she finally understood, said, "Ah, did you also want to try my cooking? To be honest, there's nothing special about my pastries. I make steamed fish the best. But didn't I already make that for you?"

After everything she said, Donghua's expression still didn't change. Fengjiu scratched her head, then continued a moment later: "Ah, so you did want to eat them... but they're all gone now." She looked to A Li. "Or we can ask His Highness if he would share some with you..." She hadn't finished her words when A Li had swiftly hid his share behind his back. "His Third Highness has six pieces, I only have four. You should ask His Third Highness, why are you asking me?" After a moment of thought, he added: "And anyhow, I'm short. I have to eat so I can grow."

"I think having one extra or one less isn't going to hurt your growth..."

"But His Third Highness has six, I only have four," A Li scowled. "I'm *not* giving any to Donghua gege... I mean, Donghua Dijun."

His Third Highness only took pleasure in stirring up more trouble. He held the six treats in his hand and grinned broadly, sidling over. There weren't many chances to aggravate Donghua. In high glee, the Third Prince told Dijun, "Princess Jiu'ge may know what Yan Chiwu likes, but that doesn't mean she knows what Donghua Dijun likes. Take these cakes for example... they are to my taste, but they may not be to your taste. Why must you fight with me for pastries which may not even be to your taste? As old-time friends, must we go through this?"

Donghua: "..."

Xiao Yan stood waiting by the staircase. He impatiently urged Fengjiu, "Are we going or not? If the cook can't make them in time, you'll have to make them for me!" At this very instant, a flying object whizzed at him

and sent him stumbling down the stairs. After a series of loud crashes, a furious growl shot upward: "Which bastard tried to murder me?!"

The soup vessel that was in Donghua's hand had inexplicably disappeared. "Sorry, my hand slipped," he said, gazing out absentmindedly.

Ah Li with a mouthful of daikon cake cheered obscurely, "Whoa, it slipped pretty far!"

Liansong: "..."

Fengjiu: "..."

After the lavishing dinner at Zuilixian, Fengjiu hadn't expected the outcome of spending all that wealth was her own confinement. The fact was that after waking up early to get ready this morning, she followed the small path inside the estate and headed for the gate to go to school. Her foot naturally landed on the ground when, 'bam,' she was thrown backward upon contact with a clear force field.

Fengjiu grew up under her Aunt Bai Qian's care since she was a little child. Her aunt had spoiled her rotten, and so she was willful even as baby fox. Whenever her infuriated father grounded her, she always kicked down the door or window to slip out. There wasn't one punishment she couldn't deal with. But her cleverness was completely useless this time. Donghua was so shameless, he had enveloped the entire Jifeng Yuan into his force field. She wasn't nearly good enough to break out of this barricade. Now at this age, she was finally confined into a place. She charged to Donghua's bedchamber ready to confront him. Dijun had only gotten out of bed, now tying his outer robe. Meeting her furious glare, he spoke to her in the languidness of a sleepy person, "I think I heard you were interested in that competition's Saha fruit."

Fengjiu looked confused.

Dijun casually explained, "Since I used my name to get you into the competition, won't my reputation get tarnished if you don't win?"

What strange things to come out of his mouth. Hadn't the King always ignored things like reputation? Since when did he start to care for it? Still confused, she questioned him, "But what does that have to do with locking me in here?"

Dijun looked up at her, now finished with tying his robe. "So I can teach you myself."

Outside, a dead twig cracked under the weight of thick snow. The spooked birds flew away and crashed into the glassy barrier. She had never heard that Donghua, the King who was born out of the Blue Sea since the beginning of time, had taken in any student. To be taught by him was even more of a pipedream. Although Jiheng called him 'teacher', Fengjiu had a hard time imagining he could really teach her anything. For such a Donghua to feel inclined to teach her was certainly a strange thing.

Nonetheless, Fengjiu did always deem herself a wise fairy. If Donghua could personally teach her a few secret moves, what difficulty would there be in winning the Saha fruit in the coming championship? At this thought, her anger was swept away and she smiled brightly in agreement.

There was another reason for Fengjiu's change of mind. The tournament being held ten days from now was especially important to her. Two days ago, she was told all competitions including duels had always been held outside of the imperial city. Moreover, according to Fanyin Valley's laws, magic was forbidden beyond the city walls. What if the challenge was changed into some sort of fruit-carving competition, Fengjiu had worried. Luckily, after asking Meng Shao, she found out this competition didn't require too many techniques after all; it remained a fencing competition. But because the rules disallowed magic, the result would be dependent on swordsmanship itself.

Sword fighting was a fairly simple matter for Fengjiu; after all, she had been playing with the Taozhu sword since she was a baby. But when Meng Shao waved his arm to show her the floating arena of icy stakes looming behind the foggy mist on the bare mountainside, she was stunned to stone. When Meng Shao next said the candidates would compete on

those ice stakes and the first to fall would lose, she was stunned even further... this game didn't exist in Qingqiu. This was why she had left early for school this morning. She had planned on asking Meng Shao for a few tricks to better handle her opponents.

Unexpectedly, Dijun blocked her in. As if he had taken the wrong medicine, he even offered to train her himself.

By the time Fengjiu woke up from her elation, she found herself standing in the kitchen making breakfast for Donghua. Did Donghua really keep her here to help her win the approaching tournament? Was he that nice? Or did he take the wrong meds? But even with the wrong meds, Dijun couldn't have been that nice.

Fengjiu served Donghua through his breakfast while her mind was filled with questions. Throughout the meal, she barely touched any food, and didn't know what she was eating. When she was clearing the table, she hazily heard Donghua map out their training plan for the next ten days. He seemed to have said the first three days were to be spent on learning how to walk. Donghua was indeed playing with her. From what she had learned the hard way in recent days, she knew she mustn't defy him even when he teased her. She needed to find out every detail of his scheme, then find a chance to sneak out of here. That would be the better strategy.

At the end of the Dragon hour (9am), Fengjiu sauntered to the rear courtyard to meet Donghua. Her eyes widened the second her feet passed the arching doorway. The vast courtyard had turned into a floating arena of snow posts. Each post was as tall as two persons, arranged into columns and rows exactly like the dueling grounds by the mountainside which Meng Shao had shown to her. Beyond that spot, everywhere else within the normally snowy courtyard was covered in new sprouts, the entire landscape a spring scene. On the old apricot trees, white blossoms spotted the branches like drops of dew. Morning light glistened on the clear force field. Under a large canopy, Dijun was idly lounging on a long bench. What an effort the King had put in only to sunbathe in the midst of snow.

When her puzzled eyes once more glanced to the ice arena, her body suddenly levitated. When she regained her cognition, a draft was sweeping snow dust by her face. She found herself standing alone on a snow post. Donghua had left his bench. Today he wore a pristine white robe. Standing tall and elegant outside the arena, he raised his head to her awhile, then unhurriedly spoke: "First, we'll use one day to practice standing. If tomorrow you can walk up there blind-folded as you do on the ground, we'll start fencing on the third day."

He went on to study her a while more. "You've stood quite long even though your magic had been taken away. Not bad."

Fengjiu fought to keep her balance and didn't dare to move. Her voice was filled with suppressed anxiety: "I, I didn't tell you that without my magic, I'm really afraid of height. Ahhh... help me, Your Majesty!"

She yelled out as she slipped and fell. But her fall wasn't as painful as she had imagined. Fengjiu blinked and perceived Donghua in her view, catching her. "Hey, you didn't leave me up there intentionally thinking I would fall off and then take the opportunity to reap a cheap gain?"

Dijun's hand was still wrapped around her waist. Surprised, he asked, "Are you sleep-talking?"

"Then why are you holding me like this? Look, your hand is still on my waist."

Dijun looked to his hand, then gave her a once-over and said, "So you've got your footing then?" Without waiting for her reply, he withdrew his hand. Fengjiu was leaning against him for support. When he removed his hand, she fell to the ground. Fortunately, it wasn't too painful thanks to the thick snow cushioning her fall. She gritted her teeth and climbed up to her feet. She raised her head to see Donghua's offered helping hand. His habitually placid eyes showed a teasing gleam which pissed Fengjiu off. She turned her head and pushed him away to stand up by herself. "I was only quipping with you. How can you be so petty?" she said, as she dusted the snow from her body. Then at the thought of something else, her

anger ignited again: "You're actually playing with me aren't you? How can I walk blind-folded up there in only one day? You have a secret technique but you won't tell me. Aren't you petty? It's a good thing you never take in any student. We'd only get teased by you all day long, then eventually we might even age prematurely and still not learn a thing."

She spoke so valiantly, head raised high that the white hairpin on her head shook as it threatened to fall off. At last, it fell away from her hair and Donghua, who had been waiting, reached his hand out to catch it. Looking down at the hairpin in his hand, his eyes glimmered in recollection of something. "They say to meet a playful teacher is a godsend blessing."

Fengjiu really didn't know what to say anymore. "Don't think I haven't read my books. They clearly say a serious teacher, not a teasing teacher."

"Oh, is that so? I forgot. But it's all the same," Donghua replied in purported surprise. Then he slid the hairpin back onto her hair. While admiring it, he told her, "If you're after the Saha fruit, then just do as I say; you won't go wrong. Although cheating in these sorts of competitions to make you win is plenty easy, they've unfortunately selected me as one of the judges. Do I look like the type that would endorse cheating?"

It was too surprising hearing these words coming out of his mouth. Fengjiu turned to the side and rubbed her jaw: "I don't think you're unfamiliar with these sorts of things..."

Dijun wasn't too happy with the hairpin on her head. He removed it and turned it into a pink flower, then carefully pinned it back on her hair. "Then let's just say I'm being upright for once."

Despite Donghua's words, Fengjiu knew it was right for him to teach her according to the principles. Her identity was special. Moreover, the Biyiniaoyao queen would also be in attendance. If anything disreputable were to be uncovered, her name would be implicated, and she'd only be creating a tempest in a teacup, for the animosity between Qingqiu and Fanyin would undoubtedly exacerbate. Dijun wasn't playing with her, he was being thoughtful, and she was pleased.

But Dijun didn't say any of this precisely, so she didn't think she should show that she knew his intentions. She silently touched her new hairpin and cleared her throat: "Then I'd have to thank you for putting in the effort to teach me." As she said these words, she felt her remark had been a little disrespectful, thus wanted to say something in reprieve but Dijun casually spoke first: "No problem. It's just quite rare to meet someone as dim as you. I look forward to the challenge." Entirely baffled, Fengjiu put away all her guilt and ignited again: "I don't believe I'm more stupid than Zhi'he. Didn't you also teach her?!"

Donghua was amused by her outraged appearance. He enjoyed watching her for a time before replying: "Zhi'he? I did guide her by obligation for a period of time many years ago. But I'm not Zhihe's teacher. After being unable to learn from me, she became Doumu Yuanjun's student." He then added, "Had this been bothering you?"

Fengjiu was absorbed by the words 'by obligation'. She hadn't paid attention to the rest of what he said. Having forgotten her anger, she unconsciously repeated those words: "By obligation?" A drafty wind cast a thin curtain of snow dust over her eyes.

Donghua dazed out and at length replied, "I was a parentless child. In the beginning when I first sprang forth from the Blue Sea, I didn't have enough fairy energy and was at the mercy of wild beasts. Zhihe's parents brought me home in sympathy and raised me up out of good grace. Ninety-thousand years later, just before they passed away, they finally conceived Zhi'he. Since they entrusted her to me, of course I had to care for her..."

Perhaps it had been so long ago, he himself was struggling with the details. He reflected, "But it seemed she didn't learn anything from me. Zhonglin told me she once said she didn't need to learn anything because I was already there for her." Although it seemed as though Donghua didn't carry an assiduous appearance in recent years, it was because for him, there was no more space for further progress. He himself had always been notorious for disliking unambitious people. From these words, he likely wasn't pleased with Zhi'he.

But Fengjiu felt she herself wasn't an aspiring person either, and couldn't help but sympathize with Zhi'he. "To be honest, if I was Zhi'he, I'd also feel that I don't need to learn anything because you are already there."

The wind carried with it apricot blossoms from afar. The petals drifted above her head. While preventing her hair from being blown in the wind, she heard Donghua's voice: "You? You're different, Xiao Bai." Fengjiu looked up in surprise and caught his gaze. Dijun quietly looked at her for a moment. "I'm a little thirsty from all this talking. I'll go brew some tea. Take this time to practice."

"..."

"You wanted some?"

"..."

The first day being trapped inside the force field, Fengjiu practiced walking on the snow piles for hundreds of times under the soft sunlight and mild breeze. Initially, she was terrified and fell twice. But it wasn't very painful and she eventually calmed down. She fell more than a dozen times throughout the day. Her feet were covered in scrapes, her forehead in bumps. By sunset, Fengjiu, who was originally acrophobic, could walk normally on these snow columns.

Donghua had brewed some tea, sat outside the arena, and played chess by himself all day.

On the second day, the weather improved greatly from the first. Snowy blasts were no longer as strong. Dijun kept his words and blindfolded her. Then he threw her onto the arena to practice her footwork on the icy formation.

After stumbling around for a time, the ground abruptly started to shake. Thinking Dijun had added new challenges, she swiftly leaned on a stake to keep her balance. Unexpectedly, one of the stakes from behind broke off,

spinning her 'round. In a panic, she lost her footing as she tumbled onto the ground, her lips landing on something soft.

She fumbled around searchingly as she tried to lightly bite on it when suddenly she heard Dijun grunted in the dark. Startled, she snatched down the silk band on her eyes. Dijun's face appeared inches away from her face. A row of sharp teeth marks lined his lower lip. Fengjiu's face blanched white then flushed red.

In the air, Third Prince Liansong was fanning his fan as he smiled brightly. "Ah Li made a fuss wanting to come look for his cousin. I opened your force field up not knowing I'd be disturbing the two of you. My bad, my bad."

The little dough was indeed floating in the air looking down at them. His eyes grew round. His mouth was opened so big one could stuff two eggs inside. In shock, he asked, "Did Fengjiu jieje just kiss Donghua gege? Am I going to have a nephew?" Then in dismay, he cried, "What am I going to do, I still haven't prepared myself for a nephew." He mounted a rainbow cloud and flew away in a huff. Liansong Jun looked back down to the two people huddling on the ground, but because he was afraid the little dough would cause trouble, he chased after the kid while feeling sorry he had to leave the good show.

Fengjiu quietly slid off of Donghua's body and slinked back to the arena. After several steps, Dijun's voice called to her from behind: "Xiao Bai, shouldn't you at least say sorry for biting me?"

"Sorry I've bitten you."

"Are you truly sorry?"

Fengjiu tripped and glared back in irritation. "What do I gain from lying to you?"

"What else can one hope to gain from lying?" Donghua asked in genuine perplexity. "Isn't it for your own gratification?"

"... fine, you win."

On the third day under a warm breezy sky, Fengjiu had mastered how to traverse blindfolded on the snow columns as if she was walking on the ground after two days of hard practice. She had been to school, and could vaguely remember these words from one of the ancient books: "Wither the heart, because all are phenomena, and because all are emptiness, all phenomena are therefore also emptiness. Reaching this state shall lead to triumph³⁸." From this Buddhist phrase, she believed the 'phenomena' were these snow piles, and she would truly be valiant if she could go into her massacre mode in this snow forest with open eyes without minding the snow piles. She needed to practice today as if nothing existed. She expressed this idea to Donghua. He was very impressed and agreed to let her remove her silk blindfold. She took a few turns, feeling that things indeed went very smoothly.

White apricot blossoms hung idly like puffs of clouds. Perhaps bored from two days of playing chess by himself, Dijun found a bit of good clay somewhere and busied himself shaping it as he sat outside the snowy arena. Having seen him make ceramics in the past, Fengjiu knew he was always concentrated on his work. But his countenance was different today. As she practiced, she glanced over in his direction from time to time. Once, twice, then thrice. By the fourth time she slipped and toppled off the ten-meter tall post. But finally she was able to see what Dijun was making. He seemed to be making a doll.

She only fell that one time today, a much better result compared to the previous two days. At dinner, Dijun gave her several more pieces of steamed fish as her reward. As she contemplated on how to casually ask Dijun what sort of doll he was making during the day, she choked on a fish

³⁸ These aren't verbatim words from any of the sutras I know of. But given FJ's academic memory, she may be paraphrasing the *Prajnaparamita Hrdaya*, or the *Heart Sutra*.

bone and was forced half a bowl of vinegar down her throat by Dijun to wash down the bone. Afterward, she forgot about her question.

What exactly did Dijun make, Fengjiu was still curious before she went to bed. She knew Donghua had handmade many porcelain wares, but never had she seen a porcelain doll. She fell earlier in the day because she had been busy stealing glances at him. When Donghua saw her, he first gazed back at her for a long time, but then determinedly turned his back against her. Fengjiu couldn't figure out what he was doing. But the more she was kept in the dark, the more she wanted to know. So, should she sneak into his bedchamber tonight while he sleep to find out? Although it wasn't proper for a woman to wander into a man's room at night, she had been to his room so many times before. She had even slept on his bed a few times. His room might as well have been her backyard. What harm was there in visiting it one more time?

Moonbeam filtered through the windowpanes. Fengjiu sleepily mulled over the matter through her throbbing head and aching back. She only planned to close her eyes for a moment before sneaking into Donghua's room, but because she was exhausted from the day's training, her eyelids closed shut the second she lay down. She drifted into sleep soon after.

Even so, this matter remained in her head, and she did not sleep very deeply. After midnight, she foggily heard footsteps approaching. Then there was the sound of opening doors followed by more footsteps coming toward her bed. These were the steps which, no matter what situation, were always serene and poised; the same ones she had listened to countless of times when she was still at Taichen Palace. Fengjiu tried opening her eyes but sleepiness weighed heavily on her eyelids like an enchantment.

The room stilled for a moment. Fengjiu felt as if she was in a dream. She was likely dreaming this up because she had wanted to sneak into Donghua's room before falling asleep. She snuggled the blanket tightly and continued sleeping. But in her foggy state, she could hear a series of soft sounds. Before her sleep could deepen, she inhaled the scent of

soporific incense. Her mind which had been mostly foggy was now entirely numb. One synapse was still working, however. Was the incense lighted by Dijun? She reminded herself to look into the burner the next morning to see whether there were soporific incense ashes in it. Then she'd know if Dijun had woken up to take care of her.

As her thoughts wandered in the night, the bed suddenly sank. Being quite old, it creaked squeaky noises. Fengjiu sensed a cold palm resting on her forehead. When its fingers moved to the two bumps she had acquired during practice this morning, she felt a slight twinge of pain. How could her dream be so real and detailed? She gritted her teeth, took in a deep breath, muttered something, and turned her back. That hand withdrew. A little later, a flowery scent overtook the soporific incense smell. She sneezed, muttered again, and turned. That hand was now spreading something paste-like onto the swellings on her forehead. It continued to gently caress her. It felt nice, like a beautiful dream, and she fell deeper into sleep.

Ah, it was the scent of cotton rosemallow paste. She knew it now!

Mufurong paste could alleviate pain and treat hematoma. Fengjiu was well aware of this. When she was a baby fox at Taichen Palace, she often ran to the small garden to pick Mufurong flowers. In those days, next to the Bodhi-covered wall were several landscaping Mufurong plants. Their frail petals scattered on the ground whenever the wind blew. She had used her claws to gather the fallen petals into a silk pouch Zhonglin had gifted her. When she had enough, she would fasten the pouch with her teeth and happily run to the small stream nearby to soak the petals into a paste which she later gave to Donghua to dress his injuries. Back then, Donghua's hands often cracked due to various inexplicable reasons. When she gave the flower poultice to Donghua, he had petted her ears. She wasn't one to wax poetic, but she wrote a very short stanza that day in memory of her emotions:

"Flowers bloom and die, flowers powderized. In happiness and harmony, always together, you and I."

When she showed this poem to Siming, he had laughed so much and told her he wanted to barf from the corniness. She hummed and fingered an extra line: "You may want to barf, but I don't." As she left merrily with her tail wagging, she thought to herself she had only written one poem in her entire life, yet the person she wrote it for would never get to read it. In her dream, she felt a sudden sadness.

Her arm was suddenly lifted. Her silk undergarment was rolled down to her shoulder. The coldness in her heart quickly spread to her fingertips. Fengjiu shivered. This dream was starting to feel too realistic. Her muddled mind began to rouse after that shiver but she still could not lift open her eyes. Despite her heavy eyelids, she managed to open a crack. The shadow that was becoming clearer in the crack of light did turn out to be Dijun. His head was slightly tilted and his hand was still on her shoulder. His long silvery hair cascaded like moonlight onto the damask quilt. His hair was slightly tangled, giving his beautiful face a faint look of languidness; his serene eyes were looking at her under the glowing light.

Dijun habitually had tangled hair even when he went to sleep in a proper position. To Fengjiu, this aspect of him was especially lovable. How remarkably realistic this dream was becoming. Nevertheless, there should still be reasons inside of dreams.

She wanted to ask Donghua why did he come by so late? Then she answered herself that it was probably to help her count her bruises from this morning. Then she wanted to ask him why must he come in the middle of the night? Then she answered herself again that Mufurong paste worked best when the patient was in a relaxed state. Then she wanted to ask him why did he need to take her clothes off, didn't he know any propriety? Then she sighed and answered herself, he had never cared for such things. He would only think of her as a fanciful woman if she were to mention these things. But besides these questions, she didn't have anything else to ask.

She should be yelling in fear, then she should scramble into the corner, cover herself under the bed quilt, and look frightened and furious that she

was being taken advantage of as she glare at Dijun. She had thought of all of the above, but she would appear even more fanciful like that.

One should never respond normally in dealing with Dijun. She must stay cool and unruffled.

Fengjiu lay still and let Dijun's hand remain on her swollen shoulder. "I'm awake," she said woodenly.

In the candlelight, Donghua looked at her awhile, withdrew his hand and whipped the paste from the porcelain bowl to apply on her shoulder. "Good, then unbutton your collar. I can't reach your back shoulder."

How could he keep his face straight while asking her to unbutton her clothes? Baffled for a length of time, Fengjiu at last pulled the bedcover all the way up to her chin, turned her back to him, and said, "I'm going back to sleep."

As she turned, Donghua stopped her. He held her left shoulder where she wasn't bruised and lowered himself down. "Are you afraid I'd do something?" His voice hinted a glint of amusement. Fengjiu turned around and saw that Donghua's face was only inches away from hers. The indigo jewel on his forehead reflected the light from the candle, a smile dancing in his eyes. She stared out dazedly.

He nonchalantly looked at her from head to toe. "What can I possibly do with you injured like this?"

Fengjiu backed away and said in a miff, "If you know I'm badly injured, why didn't you help me during the day? Why bother pretending to be nice now." When she tilted her head to the back, her chin touched the injury on her shoulder and she groaned in pain. This was when she realized she hadn't noticed that her bruises had been treated, all but the one on the back shoulder. Only that spot remained painful.

Dijun moved back slightly and said, "Of course you have to get yourself up after a fall during practice. Only then will the training work. It's better for me to not always be there to help you." Then he raised his hand to flick

her buttons open and elevated her with a cushion behind her back. His fluid movements had no sign of hesitation. When the cool paste was applied to the bruises on her milky shoulder, Fengjiu again stiffened.

In truth, Donghua was right. His reasoning was the sensible kind. Although she conceded this fact in her mind, she stubbornly huffed, "You're speaking as if I'm completely useless. Haven't I lived well without your help all this time after falling down here?" She added, "I didn't have one scratch prior to meeting you again. But look at all these injuries you're causing me now!"

Donghua's hand seemed to pause on her shoulder for longer than necessary. He arched a brow at her. "Without the protection of my Tiancang cage, you'd have been smashed into pieces when you fell to the Fanyin royal palace gates. You wouldn't still be here for me to torture."

Fengjiu immediately retorted, "It was Xiao Yan who helped me..." She suddenly stopped mid-sentence. She and Xiao Yan fell twice from a cliff. Aside from the second time which they landed on Meng Shao, everything indeed went very smoothly for them. She didn't know whether it was her luck or Xiao Yan's luck which had saved them. As it turned out, it was actually Donghua's Tiancang cage that had protected them? This discovery stifled Fengjiu's tongue. She bit her lip not knowing what to say. So Dijun hadn't left her to rot. She had heard how important the Tiancang Cage was among the deities, yet he had left it in her possession for her protection. He had been so kind and gracious, yet why didn't he say so sooner?

Regardless, it wasn't a good idea for her to keep such an important object. She only saw the Tiancang cage once during his fight with Xiao Yan. Its energy had felt vastly different from other magical objects. She wondered where he had hidden it on her body. Puzzled, Fengjiu raised her head to ask Dijun: "Then... where is it?" She coughed awkwardly and turned her head away. "I'm grateful the Tiangang cage has protected me all this while, but it's not a good idea to leave such a precious item with me. I should still return it to you."

Dijun held the candle in his hand and massaged the bruise on her shoulder. "What are you returning it to me for? It's only an extension of my fairy energy. Once I die, it'll automatically dissolve."

He had said it so naturally, it made her even more confounded. "You'll also die? Why will you die?"

Although the gods and fairies weren't bound by mortality, eternal life was only possible if no calamity fell upon the world. There were any number of disasters on Heaven down to Earth, however. From the beginning of time, numerous immortals had died as a result of these natural catastrophes.

Fengjiu heard that toward the end of the prehistoric era, there had been a multitude of mortal realms within the great trichiliocosm. Being the weakest, the Human Clan was driven to the lower sphere. But since the lower sphere was newly created at the time, the fundamental order had not been established. Droughts, floods, and glacial climates took turn to plague their world. The humans had a difficult time living. A number of deities who came before Donghua had spent considerable time to regulate natural conditions to suit the humans' characteristics. Depleting their energy in this effort, they eventually passed away. Their spirits went back to spatial chaos and there was no traces of them left in the world. Fengjiu vaguely understood that these forefathers had to shoulder burdensome responsibilities due to their extraordinary ability. They needed to sacrifice their lives for the survival of the world. But Donghua remained alive to this day. She had assumed he was different from the rest. If there were to be a day when he ceased to exist, it was a faraway thing. Now that he mentioned it, she felt as if it would be upon them before long. Suddenly dismayed, a chill took over her body and her throat went dry. She faltered, "If that's the case... when will you...?"

The soporific incense lingered heavily in the air. A few fireflies slipped through the window crack. Donghua seemed surprised by her question. He buttoned back her collar and after a moment of thought, replied, "Since the start of time, there has not been a natural catastrophe so grave it leads to an apocalypse. If ever that day comes, that will be when I have to go."

He looked at her awhile and a smile surfaced in his eyes. "But this won't happen for at least many, many thousand years more. You don't have to worry to tears yet."

Mesmerized by the unique incense, more and more fireflies filled the room. They resembled emerald gems specking in the dark night. Donghua was called Ice Face by Yan Chiwu (those whom he disliked were all called this way, Donghua was first on that list). Although there was some truth in this nickname, it wasn't used to imply his icy personality; it was rather used to imply his emotionless expression even while mocking others and his perpetually unsmiling face. He was smiling often tonight. Whether it was only in his eyes or in his voice, it was enough to make her dazzled. Still, she heard what he had just said very clearly. She weakly objected, "Why would I be worried?" while sighing in secret relief nevertheless at his words. She grinned at Donghua, then after a moment of silence, she changed topics: "I don't see any new wound on your hand, why do you still carry cotton rosemallow paste with you?"

Donghua was silent for a time at this question. Eventually, he said, "How do you know I'm often injured?"

Fengjiu perspired. No one was supposed to know about his injuries besides his closest servants and that little fox. Even Auntie Bai Qian who had close relations with Jiuchongtian shouldn't know this fact, let alone herself. Luckily, wit came to save her at the last minute. "Isn't cotton rosemallow used to treat injuries on hands?" She pretended to peek into the porcelain bowl in his hand. "Did you make this paste yourself? It's blended very well..."

Donghua mixed the rest of the paste in the bowl and lowered his gaze to her, replying, "I used to have a baby fox. It made this paste."

Fengjiu generously praised herself, "What a clever fox it must have been. The paste is so smooth and fragrant... erm, but why are you spreading it on my face?"

Donghua bent down, spread the rest of the paste onto her face, and casually replied, "Well, there's a bit left, and I heard this is also good skincare so we shouldn't waste it."

Fengjiu broke free and picked up a bit of the paste from the porcelain container with her finger. She lunged at him and grinned. "Here, good things are to be shared, you should use some too..." She pushed Donghua down and used her other hand to spread Mufurong paste onto his forehead. His eyes were glimmering. A few fireflies landed on his shoulder, some on the divider screen; the wilting lotus canvas came to life under their glow. Fengjiu knelt on him; with one hand she held his arm down underneath the bedcover, with the other she removed the silk headband from his forehead. This was the first time she saw Donghua's eyes at such a close distance. This man was the most revered god in the universe, the person she most admired. She suddenly realized the awkward position they were in and froze on the spot. Dijun didn't resist her harassment. With little concern, he only said to her, "Didn't you say good things are to be shared? Why did you stop?" He took Fengjiu's retreating hand and placed it on his own face, looking calmly into her eyes during this entire process.

Fengjiu felt her face burning. She clambered off him and scrambled into the corner. Hiding herself underneath the cover and lying on the porcelain pillow, she feigned a yawn: "I'm sleepy. Close the door for me when you leave." For some reason, her voice was quivering.

Dijun seemed disappointed. "You're going to sleep without washing your hand?"

"... No need, I'll wash the quilt tomorrow."

Donghua sat up and stayed in the room awhile. A wind entered and blew the light out. There seemed to be an enchantment cloaking over the air. Nervously, Fengjiu could feel Dijun's breath drawing closer. His hair was now grazing her cheeks, but there was no other movement. It had seemed he was only checking whether she was really sleepy or only pretending to be.

Footsteps went further away in the dark. Only after she heard the door opened then closed did Fengjiu heave in relief. She turned and opened her eyes to survey the room. Fireflies were still glowing on the furniture. Now dim and not as lively as they had been, they were perhaps sleepy as well.

There was something strange about Donghua tonight. Her heart pounded rapidly as she thought about what had just happened. She reached a hand out to calm her chest and recalled they were still covered in flower paste. As she glimpsed down on them in the pulsating firefly light, she saw that her hands were now clean with no traces of stain. Donghua must have wiped them away before leaving. Feeling happy, her lips slightly curved up; she hadn't known she was smiling. Then she closed her eyes, whispered the 'Tranquil Heart Mantra', and peacefully fell asleep.

At the end of the Tiger hour (5 am), Fengjiu's sleeve was shaken vigorously. She turned and muttered sleepily, "Your Majesty, don't bother me when it's so late. Let me..." The word 'sleep' hadn't left her mouth when it died out in the shocked eyes of Xiao Yan who was bending over her bed.

Venus shone high in the sky. "You and Ice Face have... progressed to this point?" He clapped. "I really haven't underestimated him." Then he said to Fengjiu happily, "Jiheng should give up on him. I knew he's not as faithful as I am. He couldn't handle your seduction scheme." Now scratching his head excitedly, he asked, "How should I comfort Jiheng so she would run into my arms with no hesitation?"

Illuminating the room was a single night pearl. Fengjiu saw Xiao Yan lean against the bed looking to the moon. He was happy, then pensive, then worried. Confused, she didn't know what was going on. She rubbed her eyes, pinched Xiao Yan and asked, "Does that hurt?"

Jumping back, he cried, "Don't pinch me, you're not dreaming! I broke open Ice Face's force field to take you to console our friend."

Finally remembering what he had come here for, Xiao Yan told her in a solemn tone, "Do you know what happened to Meng Shao?"

Fengjiu had been confined inside Jifeng Yuan for three days. She couldn't even talk to a mosquito; naturally, she didn't know a thing. But Xiao Yan's serious expression lifted her sleepiness. Alarmed, she asked, "Meng Shao?"

Xiao Yan's expression grew even more somber. "His most beloved General Changsheng recently passed away. He's been drinking at Zuilixian from dusk to dawn mourning for his death. His cousin Jielu is afraid he might die drunk there and came to ask for my help. But you know I'm not great at helping others. Women are better at it..."

Fengjiu put on an outer coat and pondered, "I never knew Meng Shao kept men in his estate. What bad friends we are for never noticing this preference of his. My, what a shock it must be for him to lose a loved one like this. Poor Meng Shao." As she finished speaking, she suddenly remembered the things from last night, and was trying to recall whether they were real or not. She went to the nightstand against the wall, opened the unicorn incense burner, and took a whiff. No soporific incense fragrance. She took Xiao Yan's night pearl and scrutinized the burner for new ashes. There was none. Staring into the bronze mirror, the bruises on her forehead was no longer there. But there were no traces of Mufurong paste either. Was she dreaming? And yet, why would she dream such things?

"What's wrong?" Xiao Yan asked as he received the night pearl from her hand.

Fengjiu was silent for a second before replying, "I had a dream." A short pause. "Never mind, it's nothing." She headed for the door, then returned to the chest by the window and took out a celadon bottle. "I previously borrowed some premium honey from Meng Shao to make honey cake. I didn't expect having to use it for his hangover so soon. What a pity."

Xiao Yan frowned. "The honey container is on the right. The one in your hand has 'soy sauce' written on it." He studied her awhile and sighed, "You're acting strange tonight. Why don't you go back to sleep. If I can't persuade Meng Shao, I'll knock him out with a stick."

Fengjiu rubbed her temple. "I'm probably just dizzy from the lack of sleep. Since I'm already awake, I should go." She moaned a little then said, "But we should still take that stick along."

Under the guidance of the starlight, they headed straight to Zuilixian. Meng Shao's tears, snot, and alcohol mixed together while he stared at General Changsheng's body lying in the ceramics box. A group of kneeling maids surrounded him. They tried to persuade him through tears, telling him things such as the dead was already gone, they should send him off now, His Highness the Prince should cheer up so the general could go in peace.

Fengjiu was speechless. Xiao Yan, as well. It turned out General Changsheng who drove Prince Meng Shao to inconsolable sorrow was a red-headed cricket.

A tired looking Princess Jielu was helped over by two maids. Xiao Yan scratched his head and asked her in puzzlement, "Brother Meng is so sensitive, he's pained over a cricket. I'm not sure what to say to comfort him."

Fengjiu glanced at the ceramics box encasing General Changsheng's body and for some reason felt a familiarity. There were raining petals etched on the sides. It seemed like something young ladies carried, not something for gentlemen like Meng Shao. She took another look – General Changsheng lay stiff-cold. From his body, one could tell he was once a valiant cricket when he was still alive. She furrowed her brow and said to Princess Jielu, "Perhaps after living so long in the valley, this cricket had absorbed enough divine essence to turn into a handsome lad, and that was why Meng Shao loved it so much?"

Jielu gasped a cry, covered her ears, and shot a glare at her. "How dare you smear my cousin's reputation like that?"

"I want to assume this cricket had turned into a maiden too," Fengjiu helplessly replied. "But this is a male cricket... Brother, take a look, isn't this a male cricket?"

Xiao Yan came closer to take a look and answered her, "From my many years of experience with cricket fighting, this is indeed a male cricket!"

Jielu's face turned purple with indignation. She pointed at the pair speechlessly. Her maid knowingly brought over a cup of tea to cool her down. After her rage waned a little, she glared sideways at the pair of them, sighed resignedly, and said, "Never mind, although I don't trust you two in the least, you are my cousin's closest friends. Perhaps he will listen to you. This cricket is only a cricket. It can neither turn into a handsome lad nor a beautiful maiden in the middle of the night." She glowered at them again. "...but the person who gifted him this cricket was someone special. She's whom he keeps in his heart."

Fengjiu and Xiao Yan immediately raised their ears to listen.

Restricted by their clan's rules, the Biyiniaos never intermarried with other clans. Clan's rules were a life and death matter to this particular clan. It was rare for mystical creatures to absorb enough divine essence and become immortals like the dragons, the phoenixes, or the nine-tailed white foxes. Other clans lived a limited lifespan – a thousand years, perhaps ten thousand. Among them, the Biyiniaos' was the shortest; they lived no longer than a millennium. Compared to fairies outside the valley, their lives were as fleeting as the sun's rise and fall. Marrying longevous outsiders could easily lead to tragedies, and for this reason, their clan forbade intermarriages with foreigners. At sixty, a Biyiniaos was considered an adult and could marry. Meng Shao's two younger brothers and three younger sisters were already wedded. Especially compared to the Third Xiangli Prince who already had seven little Biyiniaos, the Second Prince who was older than the Third Prince by nearly twenty years was still a bachelor. After meals, Fengjiu and Xiao Yan often discussed this matter many times without ever reaching an answer.

Thus they anxiously listened to Princess Jielu's explanation today.

Princess Jielu took another sip of tea, cleared her throat and retold the hopeless love story which began seventy years ago. A handsome lad met a maiden. Thereon he became lovesick, lost his appetite, and became ill. To this very day, he was determined to stay single if he could not have her.

It was said the maiden had given General Changsheng and the ceramics box to the young man. After returning home, he would look at the box while longing for her. Of course, that young man was charming Meng Shao of Fanyin Valley.

Xiao Yan asked, "The young lady Brother Meng couldn't marry must be an outsider? If she is alive, they still have a chance. He'd be violating the valley's rules, but that's not such a big deal. I often break our clan's rules too. The elders never could do anything about it. Staring at a cricket day in and day out and dying from lovelornness isn't a man's course of action."

What could the Demon Elders possibly do to the Lord of their Blue sect, Fengjiu thought. Their clan rules were only set for fun. But she agreed with everything else Xiao Yan said. She nodded vigorously and with utter sincerity, told Jielu, "Whose family is the young lady from? What is her name? We can help search for her if that would make the 2nd prince's wish come true. As friends, our worry will lessen too."

Jielu took another sip of tea, seemingly touched by their kindness. "Qingqiu's Queen of the Nine-Tailed White Fox Clan, ruler of the East Land, Her Royal Highness Fengjiu. I'm not sure if you've heard of her? She's the one he loves."

Fengjiu fell over her chair. Xiao Yan dropped his jaw. "What?"

When Fengjiu grabbed onto Xiao Yan's arm and crawled up, looking at Meng Shao's drinking profile from two tables away, a seed of memory fell to the ground, sprouted and flowered. She finally remember why the ceramics box seemed so familiar.

There was indeed such a story, and it happened seventy years ago.

Seventy years ago, an old-time friend of Zheyang's came to visit his ten-mile orchard and by chance met Fengjiu who came to pick peaches. It was love at first sight. Zheyang's old friend was ruler of the mountain gods. He reigned over the countless rivers and mountains on the mortal realm. His home was on the divine peak of Zhi'yue Mountain in the North land. His name was Cang'yi Shenjun. Cang'yi Shenjun did not come from the ancient families from the yore of time. He became master of the mountains due to the recent accomplishments he achieved. For this reason, Zheyang held great respect for him. In his estimation, he was the best junior deity in recent history.

Cang'yi Shenjun was a decisive man. Without any hesitation, he asked Zheyang to visit Qingqiu as his matchmaker. Zheyang agreed.

Surprisingly, his accomplishments and generous character were immediately favored by her father Bai Yi. After Fengjiu inherited the throne in the East land, the first thing Bai Yi attended to was finding her a worthy husband to strengthen her position. After countless rounds, his sharp eyes finally landed on Cang'yi. However, Fengjiu never agreed to this match. Despite her protest, she naturally couldn't win against her father. When Mount Zhiyue's wedding procession arrived at Qingqiu, her father tied her up and tossed her into the eight-carrier palanquin which would follow the curving road back to her groom's home.

Cang'yi Shenjun was kept away on business in the mortal realm at the time. Receiving the bride was a general next in command. Fengjiu looked out from her palanquin and saw that this general was at least ten meters tall. Estimating she couldn't win against him, she docilely sat still the entire way. She planned to act once the palanquin reached the palace. She would wreak havoc at that time by refusing to leave her palanquin to marry Cang'yi so the whole world could know. Let's see if her father could force her then. The carriers were expeditious; it only took half a day when they arrived at the foot of Mount Zhi'yue.

The serpentine wedding procession was winding its way into the mountain entrance when a terrified cry was heard outside the palanquin. Fengjiu lifted her curtain and gazed out. The ten-meter tall general was using a nine-section whip to lash a feeble youngster who was possibly an attendant in the procession. Feng'jiu hurled her golden hairpin to stop the whip and sent her maid to find out what was going on. The truth was quite simple. The young lad did not belong to this particular palace. He somehow joined the procession along the way, wanting to ascend Mount Zhi'yue for unknown reasons. There was a rule at Mount Zhi'yue: if one didn't belong on the mountain, one could not enter its grounds. The rainbow bell rang the moment he crossed the entrance, and he was promptly dragged out and beaten.

His legs seemed painfully lashed, blood soaking his trousers. He weakly explained, "I... I became separated from my brother, and as I was looking for him, I saw the wedding procession. I've never seen a foreign wedding before, so I lingered on to watch. I have no other intentions."

Fengjiu looked to the young man who was painfully trembling on the ground in the distance. For the time being, she didn't care whether he was telling the truth or not. If he was really just a kid looking for fun, Mount Zhi'yue was being small-minded. If he was lying, this could work to her advantage when she wreak havoc on Mount Zhi'yue tomorrow... Fengjiu lifted her curtain and briskly stepped toward the incident. She helped the youngster up and feigned surprise as she spoke: "My, isn't this Xiao Ming? I thought it was you looking from afar, but your brother should be at Zheyang's place or back home in Qingqiu. How did you get separated from him? Well, why don't you come with me first? In two days, I'll have someone take you back to Qingqiu so you can see your brother." As she helped him up, she cried loudly in further distress, "Oh no, how did you get wounded so badly? This won't do! You, you, you. You too. Quick, help Young Master Ming into my palanquin." The confused lad was brought away by a group of alarmed servants. By the time he sat firmly inside the palanquin he still hadn't a single idea what had happened.

In Fengjiu's memory, that youngster was extremely timid. He only sat quietly in the palanquin. Even though his leg wounds were hurting, he bore it until they arrived at Mount Zhiyue's palace. Seeing his painful gritted face, Fengjiu took from her sleeve a bamboo cylinder with a red-headed cricket her little uncle had gifted her. Young boys tend to like crickets, perhaps this cricket would take his attention away from the pain. She conjured up a ceramics box and transferred the cricket into it, then conjured another green-headed cricket to fight the red-headed one. The lad widened his eyes, riveted. Seeing that he was interested in this stuff, she gifted them all to him. She hadn't saved him without an ulterior motive. Feeling guilty, she gave him a small present in exchange. The lad blushed and thanked her in a tiny voice, "Miss, you are very kind to have helped me. I'll surely repay your kindness one day."

After arriving at the mountain summit, Fengjiu was led into a private room to rest. The youngster was brought to another room to treat his wounds. Over tea, Fengjiu thought of his promise to repay her. What exactly did he come to this mountain for? She had saved him no matter how one looked at it. It was natural for him to repay her. But there was one problem weighing on her mind. She was covered in a bridal veil from beginning to end. Not having seen her face, would he return the favor to the wrong person?

While her mind was still in a knot, a servant came in to tell her Cang'yi Shenjun had returned. Fengjiu's mind became more knotted. On one hand she had to deal with Cang'yi, on the other hand she had to come up with a way to turn the palace topsy-turvy before the nuptial rites. Both were taking up her brainpower. Needing to attend to these two matters first, she had no time to think about the young man she had rescued.

From that day on, Fengjiu never saw him again. Like a duckweed in a lotus pond, his face had been forgotten in some far corner of her memory. If no wind came to ripple the water surface, this memory would have been sealed away in the years of silence. The young man was but a passerby among the many passersby she met in her thirty thousand years. After

such a long time, despite recalling it now, she couldn't link the timid youngster back then to the charming gentleman today no matter what. Seventy years. What exactly had happened in that time which turned Meng Shao from a timid boy to a charismatic charmer? With hundreds of questions, Fengjiu glanced her doubtful eyes again toward Meng Shao. But the seat where he was sitting a second ago was now empty. A clank sounded on the table; a silver light flashed from the wine flagon. Nothing. Meng Shao had disappeared.

Eyes reddened from alcohol, Second Prince Meng Shao drunkenly grabbed onto Xiao Yan's shoulder. The Biyiniaos were known for their sharp hearing. Jielu's words to Xiao Yan and Fengjiu seemed to have been heard by Meng Shao, giving him a jolt of gratitude. "Really? Does everyone also think I should ignore our clan's rules and courageously go after my love?"

At this junction, he sighed, "Truthfully, six months ago I didn't want to bury this love any longer, and had wanted to break out of this cell to look for my heart's desire. But the moment I left the city, I was crushed senseless by the two of you. So I thought, 'it's fate.' Fate has declared HRH Fengjiu and I aren't destined, and eventually I gave up." His eyes gleamed at Xiao Yan and Fengjiu in the room flooded with light. "But now with you guys cheering me on like this, one person using himself as an example to break clan rules, the other earnestly helping me look for HRH Fengjiu's whereabouts..."

Fengjiu winced and glanced at Xiao Yan while wanting to slap the both of them. She stammered a correction, "We suddenly feel we need to think about this more carefully. That idea just now was perhaps not... a very good one." She turn to Xiao Yan and winked at him. "Brother, you seem regretful about your words. In your opinion, our idea was rather rash and horrible, wasn't it?"

Xiao Yan caught on to Fengjiu's meaning and immediately expressed regret: "Right, right. Horrible, absolutely horrible." Voice filled with regret, he went on: "Although the elders never punished me, all these years I've felt exceedingly guilty for violating our clan's rules. My heart aches

every time I think about it." Princess Jielu stared slack-jawed at the two of them. Meng Shao looked on in bewilderment.

Fengjiu supplemented in earnestness, "Her Highness Fengjiu... ahem... Her Highness gifted you the cricket *and* the ceramics box. Why would you only place your longings onto the cricket? Isn't the box the same? The cricket is now dead, but the box is still here. Isn't this a sign that it's still not yet time to leave everything to look for her?" She then coaxed him, "If Heaven had wanted you to leave everything to look for her, when he called General Changsheng back, he would've smashed the box as well. But he didn't do that, because it's still not yet time. What do you think, am I right?"

The bewilderment in Meng Shao's eyes deepened. A little later he said, "Your words seem reasonable. But I'm a bit confused by your conclusion."

Fengjiu patiently explained to him, "That's because you've been drinking. Your cognition is no longer clear." She continued to explain: "Say, why don't you rest to sober up. Once your head clears, you'll see that my words make perfect sense."

Young master Meng gave this some thought and decided he agreed. After one whole day of drinking, he finally dismissed the restaurant's servers. Princess Jielu and the servants moved him to a guest room in Zuilixian. Jielu let out a sigh of relief when her burden was finally lifted.

After everyone left, when they and the two yawning servers were the only ones remaining in the main hall, Xiao Yan who had been witnessing an intriguing play gave Fengjiu a thumbs-up and was about to speak when Fengjiu beat him to it: "I have no idea why Meng Shao likes me. Even if you ask, I won't know what to tell you."

Disappointment surfaced on Xiao Yan's face. Fengjiu carefully gave the room a sweep before telling him, "I feel like from the time we stepped into this tavern, someone has been watching me."

"Isn't that... the case?" Xiao Yan feigned unease. "Those two eyes are lolling on your shoulder right now, smiling to you..." Just then, a draft came from behind, raising the hairs on her arms. She started and jumped

into Xiao Yan's arms. Xiao Yan patted her back while cackling aloud. "Last time I hugged you, this time you hug me. We're even now."

"..."

Outside Zuilixian's second floor balcony stood a shiny green cereus plant. Basking behind the dawn light, its leaves suddenly stirred under a windless sky. A purple silhouette quietly passed by unbeknownst to the two people inside.

Seven days later, the long-awaited tournament at last commenced in the swale to the west of the city. In the past, when there were still four seasons in Fanyin Gu, the hillside here was covered in plum trees, so the swale was called Plum Valley. But in the recent two centuries, snow and ice had destroyed half of them, and the Royal Palace eventually converted this area completely into a sports ground.

Fengjiu had been talking animatedly to her fellow classmates from the time she stepped into the arena. Because Dijun had fabricated a case of pneumonia for her ten days ago so she could be excused from school, her classmates were now surrounding her in admiration to chat seeing that she was bravely competing the moment she stepped down from her sickbed. Fengjiu took a chance to glance around the arena. Sure enough, snow stakes greeted her sight. It was the same formation Meng Shao had shown her. The sharp stakes glinted frighteningly in the foggy morning sun. But after being trained by Dijun all of ten days, she didn't mind those stakes anymore; she looked to them as though she was watching drifting clouds. Speaking of Meng Shao, after Donghua released her from the force field yesterday, Fengjiu asked around and heard that he no longer displayed signs of being reckless. He had probably thought things through? She was at ease now that Meng Shao no longer tortured himself.

Fengjiu followed along the stadium built from pine and cypress wood circling the stage. Benches were already filled with spectators. The tournament only happened once every ten years thus it always drew a crowd. Although attendance was also high in previous years, the stadium was spacious enough people could sit comfortably with elbow room in

between. Only this year was the stadium so packed, it threatened to crash under the shoving masses at the news that Dijun would also be in attendance. Although Dijun often came to Fanyin Valley to lecture, he was either found in a classroom or a lecture location of choice. Commoners had never had the opportunity to meet the magnificent King.

Never once hoping they would get to meet the highest deity of all, the capital was momentarily sent into a rage three days after the news of Dijun's attendance hit. Everyone in the clan from nobles to commoners laid out mats to save their place in line. Plum Valley which had been deserted for 200 years overnight turned into a bucket of water set over boiling oil.

The Biyiniaoy Queen had taken her seat at the top of the stage, but the highest seat of all was still empty, likely reserved for Donghua. The queen above and her courtiers below all donned the same reverential expression to the point of looking stressful at the thought that they would soon be meeting Dijun for drinks while talking swordplay.

Per Dijun's disposition, Fengjiu knew he'd never come on time for these sorts of competition. He'd either be early, or he could be late. Today probably late, but how late, she couldn't guess. This morning as she was about to leave, she wondered if she should stop by his room to remind him. She had only taken two steps forward when she took one back. Her relationship with Dijun had been rather lukewarm these past several days.

Speaking of the day when Donghua had cared for her... After returning from Zuilixian, Fengjiu reflected and wondered whether everything could've been real. Dijun may have used magic to erase all traces before leaving her room. There being no traces left didn't necessarily mean she was dreaming. For some reason, she felt happy at this thought, but not wanting to pursue further explanation, she quickly decided she should thank Dijun properly. She could add a few decorations to his breakfast pastries, and she must sincerely tell him her thanks. Fengjiu yawned as she sang, her hands swiftly preparing a sumptuous breakfast. Dijun made a rare exception this morning, however, by not going to breakfast. Still

feeling pleasant despite a tiny disappointment, she brought the meal to his room. Unfortunately, the room was also quiet with no Donghua in sight. It was almost time for sword practice, and she brought the Taozhu sword to the rear garden. Unexpectedly, Donghua was sitting absently under the flowering apricot tree with a book in his hand.

Fengjiu came closer and called his name. Donghua raised his head to look at her. His eyes were as placid as the sleeping mountains in the distance. She stood dazedly looking back at him.

On a normal basis, if what happened the night before was true, Dijun's eyes should be looking at her with a certain softness, or he should at least inquire after her injuries. She quietly withdrew her smile, feeling she had dreamed a ridiculous dream. What happened last night was only her imagination; nothing had actually happened. They say what you think during the day you'll dream it at night. For her to see this dream now, did it mean she was always thinking of Dijun and eventually made a habit out of it?

Utterly disappointed, but uncertain whether at herself or something else, Fengjiu hung her head and went to the training grounds. Out of the blue, she heard Dijun's voice from behind: "Why must you have that Saha fruit?" Frustrated, she didn't care to turn around and replied him perfunctorily, "Since I never had it before, I just wanted to try it, I guess." Dijun became silent for a while, then asked another perplexing question, "Will you use it to make pastry?" Fengjiu didn't know how to answer him. The Saha fruit was used to revive the dead. Would its power be affected if she made pastries out of it, she hadn't thought of such things before. "Maybe." Then, Dijun asked yet another perplexing question, "Yan Chiwu likes pastries with Saha filling these days?" Fengjiu was confused. "Xiao Yan?" There might have been a time when Yan Chiwu told her something similar, that if they obtained the Saha fruit, she should make a pastry and split it in two. She confusedly looked into Donghua's fathomless eyes and continued to vaguely answer him: "He might. But he doesn't eat ones with mung-bean nor red-bean flavored with ginger." She then mumbled to

herself, "He's such a fussy eater." Out of the blue, a gust of cold wind blew by, turning the pages of the book Dijun had just laid down on the marble table. He frowned as he placed his hand on it. Fengjiu didn't know whether he was satisfied with her answer or not, but he did not say more afterwards.

The next several days, Dijun seemed more and more unusual. He looked as though there was something on his mind. Fengjiu didn't understand the cause at first, then she finally figured it out after days of pondering. She had forgotten Dijun traded places with Xiao Yan and moved to Jifeng Yuan so he could use her to provoke Jiheng. But Jiheng didn't become upset as he had wanted, so he had been lingering around longer. Not only that, she counted the days on her fingers and it had been four or five days since he last saw the princess. Dijun must miss her. Nonetheless, this was all caused by his careless planning to begin with. By using a force field to seal Jifeng Yuan, he made it impossible for Jiheng who had insufficient cultivation to visit him. But if he were to lift the force field now, he would be losing his face. This was likely what was giving Dijun distress. This was why he had been losing his mind these past few days.

On the night Fengjiu figured everything out and went to persuade Donghua to lift the force field, she considered the possibility that Dijun wouldn't want the world to know his feelings and would prefer to keep his relationship with Princess Jiheng a secret. Thus she cleverly said to him, "Your Majesty, let's get rid of this force field so our friends can come visit us sometimes. It will ease our worry as well as our friends'. A perfect plan, don't you think?" Dijun heeded her suggestion and in that very same night drew another force field over the old one. Jifeng Yuan was now enclosed in an even tighter case. Not only Xiao Yan, even ten Xiao Yans would have a difficult time making a dent in this shield. Thereafter, Donghua became even more taciturn. Why a cold war all of a sudden, Fengjiu couldn't really understand.

Today was snowless with a clear blue sky and floating clouds – it was a mild weathered day. The contestants had all paired up, now waiting for

Donghua Dijun to arrive so they may start. Per the tournament's rules, winners of the first round would duel in the next round. When three people remained, they would compete for first, second, and third prize.

Fengjiu's first-round opponent was a dandy fellow who did not know martial arts. She didn't mind him at all. It being early, everyone brought their swords out to clean. She also took the Taozhu sword from her sleeve and pretended to wipe it. She glanced toward the stage and saw the little dough holding onto the railings. He jumped up and down while waving to her as if he was afraid she wouldn't notice him. Standing behind him was Lord Liansong who was smiling pleasantly. They stood among a crowd, having likely snuck in to watch. Fengjiu attentively watched the dough's moving lips and guessed he was telling her: "Fengjiu jiejie, be careful not to disturb the baby in your stomach. If you feel pain in the middle of the match, you have to stop immediately and leave the arena, do you understand..." Fengjiu's hand twitched, the Taozhu sword almost flew straight to where they stood.

Donghua Dijun at long last arrived by the end of the Dragon hour (9 am). Contrary to everyone's imagination, which involved his majestic arrival on jetting clouds or roaring thunder, Dijun very simply walked on foot into the arena. At the end of the first 100 paces, he placidly climbed up the wooden steps to the terrace.

The Queen and her officials who had already sat themselves down did not imagine Donghua to arrive in such a fashion. In their mind, whether Donghua arrived on clouds or wind, he'd still descend from above. At that time, the Queen would lead her subjects and prostrate along the aisle leading up to the highest seat to welcome him... a very ceremonious reception. But right now, Dijun was still at the bottom of the terrace whereas they were already seated high above – how disrespectful this all was. Horrified, the Queen led her subjects in shifting back into their original bird form and secretly flying to the back of the stadium. They then turned back into humans as they circled back out to prostrate behind

Donghua and simultaneously chanted, "Your subjects welcome your arrival, Your Majesty."

Donghua Dijun had once reigned over the universe. Of course he more than deserved to have clans' rulers subject themselves as his liege.

Civilians on the stands stared wide-eyed at this scene. The rowdy arena hushed in an instant. There was only the occasional creaking of wooden planks underneath Donghua's feet. The King did not stop; starting from the judging official, all four sides which had been quiet unanimously knelt on their knees. "We welcome your arrival, Your Majesty," the chant echoed across the space. Dijun continued to serenely mount the terrace, heading straight to the highest seat. After he was seated, he unhurriedly waved his arm to say: "What are you kneeling for? I'm a bit late, when is the tournament starting?" The Queen, her officials and subjects bowed once more before rising. Fengjiu rose with everyone else; when she glanced in Donghua's direction, she saw that he was also casually gazing at her, a slight pause, then just as casually turned away.

Fengjiu was rendered somewhat wonderstruck. Of course she quite knew of Donghua's achievements and reputation. But when she first met him, Donghua had already sought seclusion. His daily activities involved making incense, firing ceramics, fishing, or ordinary hobbies of the likes which gave off an impression of approachability. She hadn't thought far into the fact that he had once been the regal sovereign of the six realms. So *this* was a sovereign's aura. It was the first time Donghua felt unreachably far away and high above. Sadly, this realization only came to her now. Had she realized this earlier when she was young, she would've quit chasing after him. There wouldn't have been so much pain to endure. She was quite brave in those days to think of it. But, for the record, for someone like Dijun to harbor worldly feelings and love a woman was also a strange matter to contemplate. She raised her gaze to Jiheng in her pure white dress who remained with him wherever he went. What's more, to see him put in so much effort only for this woman was an even stranger thing.

Drums pounded thunderously. Chosen by the Queen to reside over the tournament, Master Ji Han impressively came onto the tall podium set next to the dueling arena. On behalf of the Queen, he read a commencement speech, went over the regulations, and afterward lighted a timing incense with the help of two attendants. The competition then officially began.

Another deafening burst of drum resounded. Competitors stood in two rows with their swords as they entered the arena under the urging drum roll. When the signal sounded, swords immediately whirled in the wind, producing blinding flashes of the blades. At once, hapless individuals started to fall from the stakes onto the snowy forest. With only two moves, Fengjiu was able to force her opponent to tumble off the stake. From then on, she could only sit on the side to watch the rest of the match. Although her teacher had screened out many applicants, there was still a multitude of competitors left. In the first round, many perfectly alive contenders were forced to fall to an unfortunate defeat.

The incense burned fast. After one round of incense, only a third remained in the arena, twenty-six as her teacher counted, to be specific. There was no intermission. Drums pounded again and the second round began. Because Fengjiu had sat on the side to watch from half a round ago, her legs were slightly numb when she stood up. But with a fully rested mind, in three moves her opponent was knocked off once again. Because there were less people crowding the stakes, the fencing was more precise coming from everyone this round. It was also a good thing for spectators in the stands. Little by little, they were able to see more clearly, and cheers occasionally rang forth in the arena.

Because the Biyiniaos weren't very long-lived, they aged sooner as well. Fengjiu's classmates were no more than a hundred years old. Even if they had practiced since their infancy, they could not have practiced for more than one century. They were no competition for her 20,000 years of swordsmanship. Donghua was right. She only had to walk naturally on the stakes and the Saha fruit was without a doubt hers.

Although the final round wasn't confined by the incense's timing, incense was still burned to keep track of when the last three remained and to use for future reference if sword fighting was still the competition of choice. But at this time, the entire stadium watched in surprise when twenty five people already lay sprawled out like dumplings on the snowy ground below the stakes while the incense was still burning. Atop the stake formation pointing to the sky like jade-white bamboos, only one stood tall. It was Fengjiu.

Inside and out, the arena became shrouded in silence. Then cheering roars erupted. Throughout the years, it was very rare to witness such one-sided result. With her sword in hand, Fengjiu sighed in relief. She'd won. The Saha fruit was hers. Those ten days of torture from Donghua was worth it after all. She flew down from the snow stakes and saluted her sprawling classmates, thanking them for going easy on her. She took time to glance to the terrace where Donghua was leaning back against his chair as he casually looked down on the chaotic battleground below, his thoughts indecipherable. He had helped her to victory but he wasn't giving her even one tiny supportive look. Fengjiu was secretly disappointed, but the elation of gaining the Saha fruit quickly took over her disappointment. The little dough and Lord Liansong made their way through the crowd to congratulate her. Fengjiu held back her joy and politely answered back as she heard teacher Ji Han announced the results on the stage.

Through her teacher's booming voice, Fengjiu heard her name, heard her prize was a basket of peaches personally picked by the Heavenly Queen, second prize and third prize were a magical sword and a jade bottle with some sort of special use respectively. She did not hear her teacher mention anything about a Saha fruit.

In the frigid wind, Lord Liansong waved his fan as comprehension dawned upon him: "No wonder Donghua hastened to look for me last night, saying he must bring back a basket of peaches. So this was what it was for." Then he furrowed his brow. "How strange these Biyiniaos are. Did they only decide what the first prize would be the night before?" Now he

smiled. "But these are really the best peaches. Normally, I'd have to beg my mother for some. When they are brought to Jifeng Yuan, please have a feast so we can all enjoy them." Fengjiu woodenly moved her lips: "Right." She looked up to the stage - everyone had left. The little dough innocently asked, "Then can I bring two back for my parents?" Liansong Jun answered him, "I don't think it's right for you to eat some then bring more back."

The dough thought for a moment and countered, "Then can't you just take it as though I eat all three of them?" Liansong Jun raised his fan and smiled privately. Fengjiu forced a smile: "I'm not interested in these peaches, I'll give you my share." Then she turned and left. After two steps, she carelessly ran into a snow stake. As though she was reminded of something, she turned back and said, "I feel a little sick. When they bring the peaches over, will Your Highness or Ah Li host a feast and invite Meng Shao, Xiao Yan, and Jielu over to enjoy them?" The dough tugged at Liansong's sleeve: "What's wrong with Fengjiu jiejie?" Lord Liansong slowly folded his fan. "There must've been a problem."

Drifting her way out of Plum Valley, meeting her sight was a vast field of white snow, on it was rampageous footprints left behind by the spectators leading back to the imperial city. Fengjiu took a deep breath, cold air seeping into the depth of her organs. Xiao Yan said it was best to visit Zuilixian when one wasn't in a good mood. The sadness didn't go away once you sobered up, but at least for a short while you could forget it all. Jiheng hadn't been warm to Xiao Yan these days. His words were depressing, but there was some truth in them.

As she was heading toward the city, while searching in her sleeves she discovered she had forgotten to bring drink money in her haste this morning. Fengjiu stood dazed in the middle of the fork, she could not think of where else to go besides Zuilixian. Now things were apparent. Donghua had replaced the Saha fruit with a basket of peaches. He should know how much she wanted the fruit, he should also see the effort she had put in for it. But on the entire way back, she could not come up with why

he had wanted to switch the prize. Perhaps she should go ask him herself. If he wasn't in great need of this fruit, maybe she could plead with him to reward it back to her. Feeling bitter at this point, she lifted her heel to head for Jifeng Yuan when she heard a melodic voice calling out to her from behind: "Princess Jiu'ge please wait!"

Fengjiu turned her head. The person striding toward her was indeed Jiheng. The last time they met was at the lavish feast she had paid for ten days ago. She could still vaguely recall that Jiheng's mood wasn't very good then, she had seemed a little unhappy. On the contrary, she seemed cheerful and spirited today, and there was a slight resemblance to the young woman who came to Taichen Palace three hundred years ago.

Fengjiu glanced past the princess; Jiheng's eyes followed. She lightly smiled: "Teacher isn't here. I came to look for you without his knowing. Because I feel guilty to have unavoidably taken what you wanted, I came to say sorry."

Upon catching Fengjiu's confused expression, she continued: "To be honest, I also wanted to have this year's Saha fruit from Jieyou Spring, so last night I came to ask Teacher for it. He switched it for me with the Heavenly Queen's peach basket. When I saw Yan Chiwu a moment ago, he told me you only participated in the tournament for this Saha fruit. No matter how I think about this, I have wronged you this time..."

Fengjiu now understood. So this was what happened, it all made sense now. But why did Jiheng especially come to tell her this...

Fengjiu quietly watched Jiheng. Even though Fengjiu didn't like her that much, in her memory Jiheng wasn't a bad person. But did she really come here to apologize out of guilt or did she merely wait for an opportune time to deliberately disconcert her, Fengjiu could not decide for now. Jiheng had always been kind to her, but she knew the princess wasn't very fond of her either.

Nonetheless, what important use did she have for the Saha fruit, was it as urgent as herself? If Jiheng didn't need it too urgently, and if she genuinely

felt sorry, then... she lifted her eyes and said, "Can you let me have half of this Saha fruit? I can trade anything you want for it."

Jiheng was stunned momentarily, as though she couldn't believe Fengjiu stood there for so long only to propose such a thing. Her lips curved slightly: "Princess Jiuge, the reason I came to apologize to you was because I cannot share that Saha fruit with you, not even half."

Jiheng had always been refined in her manners. As the eldest princess of the Demon clan, each of her words and actions was befitting of her status. She remembered Jiheng always spoke cordial gentle words, she never heard her say unkind things. So this was how she looked when she uttered unkindness.

She hadn't come to apologize afterall.

Jiheng approached closer, her melodic voice sank low, and with great calmness, her eyes softly danced: "Additionally, there is a presumptuous request I'd like to ask of Your Highness: from now on, please stay away from my teacher."

Fengjiu now comprehended the situation. This was probably the real reason Jiheng came to see her for. The apology was only an excuse to keep her here. Recently, she stopped paying attention to what other people say. She had also just left the arena after undergoing some emotional shocks. Feeling weary, she took a step backward away from her and said, "I'm afraid I don't know why you're hurting me by saying this. If you won't share the Saha fruit, there's not much more we can say."

Jiheng ceased to smile; her voice was without humor now: "I knew such words would surely displease you, but I say them for Your Highness's own good. My teacher's gaze toward you has changed these days. Your heart must be moved?" She gave Fengjiu another glance and continued: "I don't know how long Teacher had lived for. In his infinite life, he is often bored in loneliness. He loves seeking new things. You're smart and pretty, so it's only natural you should feel he is attracted to you. But he merely sees you as a new playmate. Going any further will only bring you pain." Without

letting Fengjiu have a chance to react, she lowered her head and added, "You probably think I'm saying this because I myself love him." She paused. "I'll be honest, I was once betrothed to him. But in my ignorant youth, I missed out on a wonderful match. Throughout three hundred years, Teacher had never once abandoned me. He made me realize who was the true person I should entrust my happiness to. Your arrival made me realize my own feelings. His special attention to you indeed pains me greatly. That was why I asked him for the Saha fruit, to test my importance in his heart. I, too, have been afraid whether we would be able to continue our fate which had been broken in the past, but he didn't think twice before giving it to me." After a moment of reflection, Jiheng finished: "I want us to be everlasting. Princess, please don't get in between the two of us."

A long time after Jiheng had left, Fengjiu was still rooted to the same spot. Wind grew more fiercely on the outskirts of town, blasting away even the sunlight. The sky was becoming opaque. What did she say when Jiheng left? She might have politely said something along the line of "I wish you and His Majesty the King an everlasting ending." While Jiheng was expressing her grief with heartfelt words, Fengjiu's face was utterly cold, she didn't even pay attention to how Jiheng had replied to her afterwards. It was possible Jiheng had hid the light in her eyes as she also politely said she had always known Princess Jiu'ge to be a wise person.

She had been a very wise person indeed. In order to have the Saha fruit, she spent so much effort and endured so many bitterness to ultimately lose against a few of Jiheng's ordinary words to Donghua. She felt aggrieved, but what could she do. Deep down, she understood that Jiheng was the one Donghua loved. Recently, they were having conflicts which they had not been able to resolve. Using the Saha fruit, Donghua had hoped he could soothe Jiheng and thereby resolve their conflicts. His action wasn't excessive at all. Still having consideration for her, Donghua went to the Heavenly Queen and asked for a basket of peaches. At least he was thinking about his junior. She had no reason to feel wronged.

When Xiao Yan said Donghua paid attention to her because he wanted to be her friend, he had overrated her. Jiheng was right. Dijun only wanted a new playmate in his momentary loneliness. Jiheng's words were candid, but she was being truthful. Feeling a stab at her pride, Fengjiu had wanted to refute but didn't know what to say. All this seemed to have verified the idea that Dijun was using her to provoke Jiheng. If Dijun could hear Jiheng's words to her just now, he would be overjoyed. It meant she had brought them together, so she had been quite useful. Jiheng said she wanted an eternity with Dijun, was that not also his wish? If they reconciled, he should have no need for her anymore? Naturally, he would move out of Jifeng Yuan and go back to Jiheng's side. Naturally, he didn't need her to take care of his meals anymore. Naturally, he also wouldn't need to drag her out for practice on the snow stakes anymore. Then, this was actually a good thing.

She didn't know why, but she felt even more saddened upon her understanding. Cold wind picked up, she squinted her eyes and raised her sleeves to rub them. When she opened her eyes again, the endless snowfield became even more nebulous.

Fengjiu sat forlornly on the side of the road for a while. When her heart calmed down, she thought once more of the Saha fruit. She felt she should still return to Jifeng Yuan again. She had put in too much effort for it. Jiheng didn't want to share the fruit with her, but it might work if she asked Donghua. Donghua could coax Jiheng with his many other precious treasures. But for her, she absolutely must have the Saha fruit in order to save Ye Qingti. Even if Donghua had only treated her as a temporary friend, she felt she had done a good job of being one. If he agreed to let her have the fruit, she could continue be his spare playmate, she'd even do whatever it was he wanted.

There was a second when she also felt it was a demeaning thing to do, but up to this day, she hadn't been able to find any other way. If crying and begging didn't work, she would grab hold of his sleeve and sob wretchedly. Then again, Donghua may not care for her tears. Apart from

the few people he cared about, the rest didn't mean anything to him. Like when he freely gave the Saha fruit to Jiheng, he undoubtedly didn't care about her sincerity and efforts. She knew this side of him too well.

Some time later, Fengjiu wiped her eyes and stood up to head back to Jifeng Yuan. She tripped on a pebble on the way.

Jifeng Yuan's gates were wide open. Standing outside, she stared down into the clear stream and fixed her garments. When she saw her reddened eyes, she picked up some snow by the bank and pressed onto them. Then she closed her eyes and sat on the ground for a while. When she stared back into the water and saw no more redness, she made sure everything was presentable one last time before turning into the courtyard. The yard was exceptionally quiet; on the pond surface remained a few withering lotus leaves. Usually, Donghua would be resting in the back garden or fishing by the pond at this time. She took a deep breath, and as she went straight to the rear garden, a blue-robed person waltzed out from behind the arching doorway. Xiao Yan pushed aside the draping green vines above the door, surprised to see her. He didn't have a chance to speak when she had asked first, "Is Dijun inside?"

Dijun wasn't inside. Xiao Yan frowned and told her with a scratchy voice, "You're just seconds late. Ice Face had carried an injured fox with him back to Jiuchongtian for treatments. Apparently, he found a dying fox on his way back from Plum Valley. He used his own fairy energy to keep it alive, fed it an elixir, and took it back to Heaven. In my opinion, Ice Face doesn't seem the generous type. It suddenly arouses a little compassion from him now because he probably thinks it looks like his lost fox from all those years ago." Bitterly, he went on: "Just this little act of kindness moved Jiheng. If it wasn't because she didn't have enough cultivation and could not leave Fanyin Valley, she'd have left with him a long time ago." His face was now full of sorrow. "Jiheng went to see him off. I didn't go along because I didn't want to see him. I waited here for you so I can bring you out for drinks. I think Ice Face might not even come back for another three or four days. Is there anything pressing you want from him?" He then

remarked in newfound recognition, "Now that Ice Face had finished everything here... perhaps he won't come back?" He rambled on and on for such a long time, Fengjiu didn't catch on to everything. She only heard part of what he said. "Did you say Dijun won't come back for at least several days?"

Three or four days were too long. She heard from Meng Shao the Royal tradition regarding the picking of a Saha fruit. The sacred tree was nurtured by Heaven. Like magical grass in Yingzhou by the East Sea protected by guarding beasts, the Saha fruit was guarded by four pythons under the stone pillars. Before she could pick the fruit, the Queen would have to use the blood from her fingertip to drop into the pythons' bellies. After they went to sleep, she would be able to near the tree. For this reason, she learned that on the night the competition ended, the Queen would drop her blood into the bellies of the serpents then wait until the second hour of the night before she could come to take the fruit.

Tomorrow night, or at most the day after tomorrow, the Saha fruit would be sent to Jiheng's hands.

It seems asking for Donghua's help was impossible now.

Was there any other way? Should she beg Jiheng again? Fengjiu was startled at this thought. She must be at her wit's end to contemplate such a humiliating thing. If she begged Donghua, he might take pity and let her have it. She didn't think he disliked her. But if she were to beg Jiheng, no matter how pitifully, she wasn't certain the princess could be moved. She was the thorn in Jiheng's eyes, she had made it very clear. If she was a simple little fox, her dignity mattered little. But she was ruler of the East Land, queen of Qingqiu. She could not let Qingqiu's name be dragged down by other people. She couldn't do this kind of thing. Since this was the case, she might as well try her luck sneaking into Jieyou Spring before the Saha fruit was picked. When this idea flashed in her head, she suddenly realized: when there was nowhere else to go, this, in fact, was a clear path, and right now she had nowhere else to go.

More than anyone, she knew how dangerous it was to sneak into Jieyou Spring. If there was a choice, she wouldn't want to risk her life either; but there was a kindness she owed Ye Qingti. For so many years, she hadn't been able to repay him; she constantly bore this debt on her shoulders and often felt burdened with guilt. Incidentally, she fell into Fanyin Valley and came upon a miraculous opportunity to save him. She didn't want to let this chance go. It wasn't that she hadn't considered safer methods to obtain the Saha fruit, it wasn't as if she didn't try. But sometimes it was hard to predict the ways of the heavens. Perhaps because Ye Qingti had sacrificed his own life to save her in the past, Heaven didn't think it fair should she return the favor so easily. There must be a life-endangering challenge in exchange for there to be justice. Heaven had always operated under Heaven's ways. After thinking so, she didn't bother mulling further into it. She looked to the sky. If she wanted to steal the Saha fruit, it had to be tonight.

When he saw her go right past him into the arching doorway, Xiao Yan questioningly asked, "You're not going to Zuilixian for drinks with me?" She undecidedly asked to do it another day, but in her mind, she thought it would still depend on her luck tonight. If her luck was poor, she wasn't sure when 'another day' would be. Xiao Yan sighed that she had no sincerity and, in a few steps, reached the exit of the courtyard. As he was about to leave, she called for him to stop. Xiao Yan happily turned around and said, "I knew you'd be a good friend and want to accompany me." Fengjiu observed Xiao Yan from head to toe and told him, "Another day. I just felt that since we have been friends for a period of time, I wanted to take a better look at you." Xiao Yan scratched his head confusedly. "You seem to have something important to do, that's fine then. Right, I heard Zuilixian got a new chef recently. Should I bring some signature dishes back for you?" She nodded. "Alright, but I eat bland these days. Tell them not to make it too spicy."

It was a moonless night. A few stars dotted the sky. The secret tunnel Xiao Yan created half a month ago could still be used. After getting lost last time, she learned from experience and carefully followed along the path straight to Jieyou Spring this time. Fengjiu sighed to herself, indeed everything in life was karmic and connected. This was the 'fate' which Buddhism talked of.

Jieyou Spring was a crystal-clear blue stream. The Saha tree standing on the bank resembled a cluster of billowing cloud. In the middle of that cloud was a gleaming red fruit. The four pillars stood quietly around it; it was uncertain when the four pythons would break free from the stone. Donghua once asked if she was afraid to go out during the night because she had fallen into a snake nest as a child. Yes, she was afraid of the night, and out of all animals and beasts, she was especially afraid of snakes. But standing here right now, she didn't feel that same fear. Fear arose when people had something they worried about. On the way here, however, she already thought of the worst case scenario. Everything else was now but an ephemeral cloud to her.

This spot was about a hundred meters away from the Saha tree. It was impossible for her to defeat the pythons in a distance of 100 meters, then take the Saha fruit. Her uncle-in-law, Lord Yehua, had also gone to Yingzhou in the East Sea to steal magical grass. Despite his remarkable cultivation, he lost an arm to the guarding beasts. She didn't have the capability to go this head-on route.

She planned to transfer her 30,000 years' worth of fairy energy onto the protective barrier. Let the pythons attack on the outside all they want, she would only single-mindedly barrel ahead for the Saha fruit. After she picked it, she would turn around to fight the pythons. This would test her speed. If she was fast, the barrier with her fairy energy might buy her enough time for the fruit. Although she was using up all her energy now, she could always cultivate it again. It wasn't of great consequence. But if she wasn't fast, the shield wouldn't be able to hold out long enough for her

to escape from the pythons' territory. It was hard to say what the consequences would be at that point.

At the same time, Donghua had said his Tiancang Cage was still with her. Although it was a magical object which could only be controlled by its master, since it was on her body, it should automatically protect her in dangerous moments. No matter how dire the situation became, she wouldn't lose her life. There was nothing overly grave to worry about.

Night wind howled. Fengjiu cast a spell from her fingers and chanted an incantation to conjure up a protective barrier around her body. She suddenly wondered what would happen if she somehow got the Saha fruit, but Jiheng became upset and Donghua made her return it? She wasn't certain if Jiheng would do this or not. But even so, she would never return it. Worse comes to worst, she would break off relations with Donghua. Yet she felt weak at this thought. It would be nice if Donghua could be a fraction as good to her as he was to Jiheng. She didn't need much, just a fraction. How good would it be if all she also had to do was persuade Donghua to let her have it. But if this didn't happen 300 years ago, 300 years later it'd still be a fantasy. Fengjiu couldn't help but be saddened by that futile dream.

She inhaled deeply and looked out to the quiet night sky full of perils. Then she closed her eyes and transferred all of her fairy energy into the protective shield. She was beginning to fade away along with her draining divine source. Her face paled gradually as the protective shield turned from red to blinding gold.

This golden flash of light shot toward Jieyou Spring. The ground instantly shook, mountains rattled, wind howled like demonic cries. Four pythons leapt out from the stone pillars. Their mouths opened wide as they breathed out venomous smoke. Long sharp fangs stabbed at the golden light. The flash of light bore the python's attacks and kept barreling ahead for Jieyou Spring. The four pythons' eyes glared angrily. They hissed to the sky, fire and lightning blasting from their bloody red mouth. In waves, they shot out at the golden light. The golden light's speed gradually

slowed down, but it was still dodging, still sprinting toward the Saha tree. When it reached the tree, it instantly hid into the tree's thick canopy. Afraid they could harm the sacred tree, the pythons' assault grew less offensive, they could only stay outside while thrashing their tails furiously, capsizing the water inside the spring. Fengjiu's lips were pale; she wiped cold sweat from her temple then tremblingly picked the fruit off its tree. The enraged pythons attacked the thief. She hastened to stick close to the tree to avoid their fangs. Her fairy barrier was starting to crack under their onslaught. They were more menacing than she had imagined. It would be difficult when she turned back out. Although fire and lightning from the pythons' mouths were only pounding on the shield, her body still couldn't escape from damage. There was no wounds, but her bones and tendons ached all over. Fengjiu never thought such pain was possible.

Now that she got the Saha fruit, the pythons hissed in increasing fury. They attacked more fiercely when she turned back. As black clouds pulled in, thunder and lightning struck down onto her protective shield. Fengjiu's body experienced a burst of sharp pain as she felt the barrier cracking around her. Her body hurt as if it was cut by blades; her feet began to slow. The barrier changed from gold to red then gradually weakened to a silvery light. Ten more steps and she'd be out of the python's land. Suddenly, she heard a loud explosion - the magic shield had shattered into pieces. Fengjiu looked up in fright. A lightning bolt was aiming for her head from above. Lurking behind the voltage was the python's burning red eyes which resembled two flaming fireballs. Sharp venomous fangs dove at her. Fengjiu instinctively dodged. The fangs only grazed her sleeve but she was thrown ten meters backward from the wind force. In the distance, another large fireball was now shooting from the python's mouth, swerving in her direction. All of her 30,000 years of cultivation was now depleted; what she had left would not be able to withstand the attack. In this second, she thought it was the end. Her heart plunged into the snowy abyss. She closed her eyes in wait when, only one meter from reaching her, the fireball suddenly ricocheted backward. It was the

Tiancang Cage. At the very last moment, it indeed came to her rescue once again.

She struggled to get up. Several meters in front of her again emerged a python. She held the magic fruit and took a few steps forward, then instantly retreated. The Tiancang Cage couldn't follow her fast enough. She realized at this time the cage's magic could act like a fairy barrier but it could not move with one's body as the barrier did. The ground surrounding Jieyou Spring shook violently. In an instant, there were people swarming out to watch. She had thought about the consequences if the Saha fruit were to be lost. Likely Donghua, Jiheng and Meng Shao would guess it was her doing, but they wouldn't be able to do anything without evidence. But at this time if she continued to stay inside the Tiancang Cage to keep her life, everyone would be able to see her trapped inside the matrix. When things reached that point, war between the Biyiniaos and Qingqiu was hard to avoid.

She must leave this enchanted zone at any cost. Hopefully, she would be able to make the ten-pace long escape. She must remain unafraid. She only needed her eyes to stay bright, her mind to stay clear. Then, if she used the last scrap of her energy, she didn't believe she couldn't escape, Fengjiu encouraged herself. Her eyes began to blur from sweat but she calmly observed the four pythons' movements. After continuously attacking the marble-strong Tiancang Cage, the pythons were also tired out as they took a second to breathe. Fengjiu seized this opportunity to abruptly dart out from the cage. Like a flash, she sprinted to the matrix's border. There remained only a couple more steps to get out. Her feet suddenly tripped. The pythons' thunderous hiss boomed over her head. The last thing she saw was a raging flame which then strangely extinguished in the python's burning red eyes. Those blood-red eyes suddenly welled up with tears. Having never seen a python's tears before, she watched in stun for some time. In the void, an extremely low and cold voice called out chokingly, "Your Highness Aranya." She clearly heard it to be the sound of a python. Fengjiu had listened haphazardly to the tale of Aranya, but she never gave much thought over it. With this voice,

coldness started to take over her body. Pain increasingly spread all over her, ending in a tearing shock. From the time she stepped into the pythons' territory, pain never once let her go. But she endured it without uttering one word. At last, she could no longer bear the agony and let out a cry. Her consciousness gradually gave way to the excruciating bout of pain.

For Taichen Palace's housekeeper, Zhonglin, there was a worry weighing on his mind lately. His Majesty was acting curiously ever since he returned from Fanyin Valley. Of course, Dijun had always been an eccentric person. Zhonglin himself could not fully understand the King despite being next to him for so many years. But this time, the peculiarity was quite different from other times. For example, he held a book in his hand dazedly for half a day without turning the page. For example, he forgot to boil water and instead used cold water to steep his tea. For example, he held chopsticks in his hand without knowing what he was eating during an entire meal. There was even one time when His Majesty asked him what would be the best way to off someone so that no one would notice his absence. Zhonglin was a principled fairy all of his life, of course he couldn't offer a good advice regarding this. Dijun seemed disappointed. He could tell Dijun had lost his mind somewhere these days.

Lord Liansong came to look for Dijun the afternoon after he returned to Taichen Palace. Liansong often frequented Taichen Gong, so his visit was nothing new. But Lord Liansong who had always carried a carefree expression on his face was wearing a solemn look today. It had been a long time since Zhonglin saw him like this. The last time might have been when Cheng'yu Yuanjun ascended to Heaven more than four hundred years ago. The spirit fox Dijun brought back with him was carried back by two young servants from the doctor's home today. Under the doctor's miraculous ministration, its condition was no longer very serious, and it was now looking at its savior full of admiration. This was a fox which only recently was able take the human form.

In reality, Dijun wasn't a merciful person who readily saved others. Zhonglin was also puzzled as to why he had rescued a fox this time. But looking at its red fur, he suddenly remembered the lively baby fox who once lived here three hundred years ago. It was likely an act of kindness springing from thoughts of the past. Although the baby fox in those days couldn't shape-shift, and its fur was quite ordinary, its fairy energy was much stronger than all the ones that could change form. Dijun especially adored it. Throughout the years, he could tell Dijun loved that fox more than any other. But it got lost for some reason. Its fate with Dijun was probably too fragile.

Zhonglin looked to the distance absently and sighed. He was about to head to the main hall to take care of things when he suddenly discovered Liansong, who had left but now returned, standing in front of him. Liansong raised his fan and asked, "Right, is Donghua in the garden, the main hall, or his bedchamber? I'm too lazy to take the wrong route."

Zhonglin always knew exactly where Dijun was. Liansong headed straight for Donghua's bedchamber, not a single one of his steps wasted. At this time, Donghua had arranged a game of chess, but there wasn't a single stone on the board. He had been holding a stone in his hand for some time without placing it down. Upon a closer look, he didn't seem to be thinking of the game, he seemed more like his mind had left him. Behind the wall screen was a small nest. A red fox was timidly poking its head out, its glassy dark eyes abashedly looking at Dijun.

Liansong came for a reason; he walked straight to Donghua. The King woke from his stupor and motioned him to sit. Liansong went to the most comfortable looking chair and cut to the chase: "The Saha fruit of the Biyinia clan can bring back the flesh and bones of a dead mortal this year, have you heard of this?"

Donghua placed a black stone on the board, then picked up a white one and absentmindedly replied, "I have, why?"

Liansong furrowed his brow. "I heard Fengjiu once married a mortal to repay some sort of debt. After he died, she returned to Qingqiu. Although

Siming said there was nothing between the two, it feels strange if you connect it to the Saha fruit. So I called Siming over to Yuanji Palace this morning for a drink. Siming can't hold his liquor. After only a few bottles, he told me even the things I didn't ask. It has to do with you."

The white stone fell to the board. "It's normal for Xiao Bai's business to be related to me," said Donghua. He then indicated for Liansong to go on.

Liansong hesitated before continuing. "According to Siming, Fengjiu traded her fur with the Black Demon Lord, Nie Chuyin, in order to help you. After coming into possession of her fur, he let her borrow a temporary red coat to wear." He studied Donghua as he told him, "This event happened precisely 305 years ago."

Donghua was seemingly surprised. The hand which placed the stone on the chessboard remained frozen in its spot. "Do you mean to say the baby fox I lost was Xiao Bai?"

Liansong poured more tea, took a sip, and went on. "I heard you saved her life once when she was young. Thereafter, she could not forget you. More than seven hundred years ago when Taichen Palace was looking for helpers, she asked Siming to bring her into your palace as a maidservant. But for some reason, you never paid any attention to her. Later when she heard you were imprisoned inside the Wicked Lotus Sphere, she went to save you and turned into the baby fox that stayed by your side, likely hoping she could move your heart. But afterward, you intended to marry Jiheng..." At this point, he glanced to Donghua who was enduring emotional shocks and hesitatingly continued, "Is it true that before your wedding with Jiheng, she made Jiheng injured and you ordered Zhonglin to lock her up, then neglected her for a long time?" After seeing Donghua frowningly nodded, he went on, "It was said that Zhonglin took pity on her and let her out. After which she was tortured by Jiheng's snow lion and almost lost her life. Luckily, she was saved by Siming. When Siming was drunk, he lamented that she was gravely injured at that time. It took three days of bed rest in his estate for her to wake up. But you didn't care at all, didn't go to look for her, thus she was heartbroken and went back to

Qingqiu.” Then he resumed lamenting, “No wonder you searched every corner from Heaven to Earth but still could not find her. It had felt strange to me too, how she had gone missing without a trace.” Then he added, “I mulled over these things and could guess you were not aware of any of them. Your relationship seems to be going well these days, but there may still be misunderstandings Fengjiu has toward you.”

Dijun who rarely showed emotions was now rubbing his temple apprehensively. Liansong looked at him in surprise and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Donghua’s voice sounded different from usual. “You’re right. She must still hate me. I’m thinking about what to do.”

“Ah, I also heard a couple of things about the Biyiniao Academy’s tournament which took place yesterday. The prize for first place was supposed to be the Saha fruit, but you switched it for a basket of peaches at the last minute? When the prize was announced, Fengjiu didn’t look too well.” He glanced at the small fox poking its head from behind the wall screen and said, “I’ll take care of this little fox for now. You should go see her, I’m afraid something will go wrong.”

The hand that was rubbing his temple stopped as he gazed up in puzzlement: “Did Xiao Bai look unwell?”

Liansong waved his hand to say: “I’m not really sure either.” Then he smiled again and glanced at Donghua. “I can usually guess a woman’s mind, but your Xiao Bai, honestly, is hard to guess. She just seems very upset right now so I want you to quickly go take a look, perhaps...”

He hadn’t finished when they heard noises outside. They had only gotten on their feet when the bedroom’s door was pushed down in a loud crash. Yan Chiwu was standing at the entrance, mad with rage. “How despicable! Fengjiu is trapped inside the serpent formation with her life on the line and you two are still sitting here playing chess and viewing foxes?”

Lord Liansong momentarily didn’t understand what was happening and froze from the shock of being berated. Donghua understood immediately,

but he ignored Yan Chiwu's condemnation, furrowed his brow, and quietly asked, "What happened to Xiao Bai?"

"You dare ask me what happened to Xiao Bai? Even though I like Jiheng, I still don't like how you gave her what was originally Fengjiu's. It's not that you didn't know Fengjiu needed the Saha fruit. Because you gave it to Jiheng, she had no other way but to sneak to Jieyou Spring and steal it before it was picked. How can her 30,000 years' worth of magic withstand the four pythons protecting the fruit? She's now trapped inside the serpent formation with her life on the line. I, Meng Shao, and even Her Majesty the Queen don't know what to do..."

In the middle of his speech, a gust of wind suddenly whirled past him. He turned to ask Liansong, "Where did Ice Face go?"

Liansong closed his fan, his facial expression gloomy. "Rescuing." Then he added, "I knew something was going to happen."

Jieyou Spring's surroundings were in ruins. The four pillars had collapsed. There was no traces of the clear blue stream. The only thing remained unscathed in the vicinity of the pillars was the Saha tree. The sun had risen high outside, but within the force field, it was still pitch black. The four pythons awaited in the four corners in guard, their towering eyes as red as burning lanterns. They were safeguarding a force field foggy with dense blue smoke. Within it was a white-robed maiden floating in the air with her eyes closed. Her long black hair flowed down like inky silk. It was uncertain whether she was in a coma or fast asleep.

Outside the crumbled pillars, fierce gale hissed in bouts. Donghua remained in the air as he collectedly looked at Fengjiu being trapped inside the force field. Despite her pale face, her chest was still heaving. How fortunate. He sighed in relief, his expression unchanged. In reality, he knew she was very beautiful, but because she was so animated, people's attention was often drawn to her personality. At this time when she lay still inside the force field, her elegant features were more pronounced. White skirt white blouse didn't suit her, however. It was the enchanting bright red of Saha-Manjusaka that suited her better. He had seen his share

of beautiful women in the overlong years he lived. Fengjiu wasn't necessarily the most beautiful, but fate was funny that way. All the beauties, no matter how alluring, were never able to leave an impression on him. Only her, whether her smile, whether her frown, whether her embarrassment, even when she made a face at him, he remembered it all. Each image was crystal clear in his mind. Liansong said she was the baby fox in the past. It was good if she was. But if she wasn't, it made no difference to him.

Faint Buddhist hymns resounded in the air, immersed within melancholic flute notes, fleetingly, then silent again. He lowered his gaze, his eyes pausing on the Biyiniao Queen and her prostrated subjects. He coldly spoke, "What exactly is that force field?"

Still not over their surprise at why His Majesty had personally come here, they stayed rooted in a stupor without being able to answer. Meng Shao, who was Fengjiu's friend, was extremely worried over her imprisonment finally clasped his hands together in response: "Your Majesty, it's not a force field that is trapping Princess Jiu'ge. It's Aranya's Dream."

When the word 'Aranya' left Meng Shao's mouth, those who prostrated on the ground, all but Jiheng, trembled visibly.

Meng Shao retold the tale, and it goes as follow.

In ancient lore, Aranya was an unrivaled beauty. She died a grievous death and never did reincarnate. Her soul turned into a dream maze and drifted in Fanyin Gu. Anyone who fell into her dream would fall into Aranya's sentiments while she was still alive. Those who weren't strong enough would never be able to escape. They'd stay instead in an eternal sleep until their fairy energy was completely drained by the dream and they themselves turned into mere smoke.

When Princess Jiu'ge got lost inside the serpent formation, she must've entered the Aranya Dream at the same time it drifted by. Aranya was nurtured by the four pythons in these pillars since she was young. They

must have thought Princess Jiu'ge was Aranya and thus determinedly fought to protect her by keeping outsiders from intruding.

Besides the lost person coming out himself, there was a safer way to solve Aranya's Dream: the person closest to him could enter the dream to bring him back. But in the current situation, one must first pass the serpent formation in order to enter the dream and bring Princess Jiu'ge out. It wasn't difficult to battle the four pythons, but Aranya's Dream was merely a shifting image. It only manifested into concrete reality when someone entered inside. This reality took form in a pale blue force field. The dream's rendered world was unusually fragile. Fighting ground was inevitably turbulent. If the dream was inadvertently broken, Princess Jiu'ge could end up gravely injured or even dead.

They also considered the option of sending someone with high cultivation to fight the beasts while keeping the dream intact to bring the princess out. But Aranya's Dream was sensitive to strong individuals. Anyone who entered this dream had to leave his fairy energy one hundred meters outside the dream-field. By only using his mortal body could one smoothly enter. Otherwise, the dream could break.

But how could anyone challenge these pythons after leaving their fairy energy behind? The scenario at hand was indeed a dilemma; no one knew what to do. From last night's discovery of Jiuge's imprisonment until now, no one dared to act rashly all for this reason. Princess Jiuge's prospects seemed more grim than good.

When Liansong hastily arrived, he saw Meng Shao speaking interminably, saying things he could not hear. He only saw that once Meng Shao stopped speaking, the people on the ground all together began to wipe their tears. Although he didn't understand why they were crying, it was moving to see so many people doing the same somber gesture.

As he was about to step forward, Donghua turned around and saw him first.

Donghua's expression was utterly normal. He was made at ease. Donghua had always been called Ice Face by Yan Chiwu, but from their years of friendship, Liansong knew his expression could never remain as such if Fengjiu were to be in trouble.

He was about to say hello when Donghua had come before him. With the same unaffected voice he used when he gifted him new tea flavors, he said, "You came at the right time. I have two favors to ask of you." He paused to look up at Fengjiu who was sleeping deeply inside the serpent formation. "If she's the only one to make it out alive, bring her back safely to Qingqiu and hand her directly to Bai Yi. Afterward, seek Moyuan from Kunlun. Tell him Donghua Dijun leaves the Huiming Realm to him. He'll understand."

It sounded like a will. Liansong smiled and glanced to the force field: "Because it's been years since I fought any battle, I'm afraid I won't be as quick as before. But if those pythons want to strangle you, they'd still have a difficult time..."

He hadn't finished speaking when he suddenly stopped. Liansong, who never stopped smiling even as the Tai Mountain was crumbling down, suddenly changed his expression as he jumped and grabbed onto Donghua who was calmly removing his fairy energy and nonchalantly stepping into the python formation. Out of thin air, Yan Chiwu appeared and stopped him. In his eyes was a pensiveness never before seen. He softly said, "This is the only way." He glanced to the python formation where thunder and lightning was starting to amass, rain pouring like hail. "I've racked my brains for one night and half a day without result because I never thought about removing my fairy energy and barging into the serpent formation by myself. I'm not a good enough friend. Ice Face's righteousness is like the sky itself. He has my respect."

Two people dared trespass the pythons' territory within two days making the serpents livid with fury. Their hisses were like demonic wails. Blade-sharp lightning bolts directed at Donghua. Without his fairy energy to protect him, Donghua's body was instantly slashed. The seeping blood

was quickly diluted in rainwater. The Queen and her subjects were wrought with horror watching this scene, but not knowing how to help, remained frozen in shock.

After being pulled back by Xiao Yan, Liansong probably understood now Donghua's reason. He stood by silently without a word. He and Donghua were old friends. In truth, he didn't know how much older Donghua would be if they were to compare their ages. He was born after the chaotic war times, hence he'd never witnessed Donghua's achievements with his own eyes. He had heard Moyuan mention Donghua in the past, however. According to the ancient god, only in prehistoric times did true battlefields exist. If they were to speak of these battles, they had to mention Donghua Dijun. Each time he stepped out of a battle, his body was covered in blood but his face never once changed. Such fortitude was unparalleled. Inside the python formation, thunder continued to pound ceaselessly. The collar and sleeves on Donghua's white robe were soaked in red and gold. To avoid agitating the pythons and disturbing the dream in which Fengjiu was sleeping, Dijun maintained an appropriately slow pace. Rain water dripped down his cuffs in a crimson color. Dijun remained unflinching.

Suddenly, someone among the kneeling crowd behind the Queen rose on her feet and stumbled toward Yan Chiwu. Dressed entirely in white, it was Jiheng. With tears streaming down her face, she tugged on Xiao Yan's robe and pleaded, "Please save Dijun. Please pull him back. I'll promise you anything you want."

Xiao Yan remained quiet and turned his back on Jiheng. Jiheng held onto his robe as she sobbed disconsolately.

Fengjiu faintly heard the sounds of rumbling thunder and falling rain some place far off. From the time she fell into this void, she felt as though she was in a constant fuzzy state. Sometimes she was awake, sometimes not. Her mind became foggy; every time she woke, she forgot yet another thing. Last time she stirred, she couldn't remember why she had fallen into this world. Would she be staying in this eternal sleep? After many lapses, would she not remember who she was anymore? Feeling fearful, she

wanted to leave this place, but each time she roused from her trance, she felt her consciousness drifting farther away in lethargy. Her eyes were blurry, her limbs immobile. Moreover, each time she opened her eyes, waiting for her were but the silent darkness and throbbing pain.

But this time appeared to be slightly different. Thunder and rain grew more audible, as if they were striking by her ears. Someone's hand was touching her head - it felt cold - and moved down to her cheek, then it tucked away the stray hair behind her ears. Fengjiu lifted her eyes and saw a silver-maned man in purple garments looking down at her.

At this time, in this place, if she was awake she'd be greatly surprised to see Dijun. But her mind was clouded right now. When was it, where was it, she hadn't a clue. Was she a young Fengjiu or a grown Fengjiu, she had no idea either. But she seemed to know this person. Wasn't he Donghua? Then hazily, she recognized he was someone she had really liked. How wonderful it was that he came to look for her! Yet she asked him a question contrary to her feelings: "What are you doing here?" Donghua looked at her with his placid eyes but he did not answer. Her sight gradually cleared and Fengjiu saw that his entire body was drenched. "You must be cold?" she uttered in surprise.

Again, Donghua did not reply her. He only looked at her silently then pulled her into his arms. At length he asked, "Are you very frightened?"

Fengjiu was momentarily confused; her limbs felt awkward, and she was unsure of where to place them. Dijun asked whether she was frightened. Yes, she was very frightened. She nodded honestly. He smoothed back her disarray hair and comforted her in a low voice, "Don't be afraid. I'm here now."

Tears unexpectedly gushed out. Her mind was a blank, but she could feel grievances surging in her heart. Her limbs seemed to have been able to move, she ventured her hand to Dijun's back and choked back her tears: "I thought I should wait for you. I was actually sure you wouldn't come, but then you did. You don't know how happy I am." She heard Dijun whispered back, "I came for you."

She hazily perceived that the King was being very gentle today, how wonderful, so different from the usual Donghua. But how was the usual Donghua like, in this moment she couldn't remember either. Her mind weighed heavily as her awareness started to cloud. She caught his last words and said, "You're here, but I know you'll leave again. I remember I always seem to watch your back. But I'm very sleepy today, I..."

She sensed herself mumbling on, but her head was drowning further and further into confusion and foggiess. The embrace around her tightened, and before she slumped deeper into her sleep, she faintly heard one last thing from him. Dijun whispered to her, "I won't leave this time. Sleep, Xiao Bai. When you wake, we'll be home."

Appeased, she once again slipped back into unawareness. By her ears remained the obscure sounds of striking thunder and hissing serpents, but her mind was calm, so utterly calm without fear nor fright. All pain dissolved away when she was in Donghua's arms.

-End Volume One-

Bonus 2 – Tangqi Gongzi’s Interview Snippets

Q: You said *The Pillow Book* is a cute and warmhearted story, then will *The Bodhi Fate* continue to be this way or will it be tragic?

A: *The Bodhi Fate* will be darker; *The Pillow Book* is already very cute; I want my next book to be serious.

Q: Who is your favorite out of the many characters you created?

A: Presently it’s Dijun. Dijun is perhaps my most flawed hero. I really like his shamelessness and obtuseness in love.

Q: What did you want to do the most after you finished *The Pillow Book*? And when will you write *Lotus Steps*?

A: Sllleeeep. There’s no plan for *Lotus Steps* as of yet.

Q: What were your thoughts when you wrote *The Pillow Book*?

A: I wanted to write a warmhearted love story. I really like Xiao Bai’s stubbornness, sacrifice, and faithfulness in love. Before *The Pillow Book*, I actually had never seriously and meticulously written about love. *The Pillow Book* can be said to be my very sincere effort in writing a love story. It makes me warm and happy

Q: What type of hero do you like? Who is your favorite out of all your heroes?

A: Dijun, of course. I’m the type that likes whomever I’m writing about at the moment. Who knows? Maybe I’ll like shifu (Moyuan) the best after I finish *The Bodhi Fate*.